

UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY



111 289

UNIVERSAL  
LIBRARY









*BRITISH ARTISTS*

---

WILSON AND  
FARINGTON

*Edited by S. C. KAINES SMITH, M.A.*

# BRITISH ARTISTS

EDITED BY

S. C. KAINES SMITH, M.A., M.B.E.

---

*The volumes at present arranged comprise the following,  
here given in (approximately) chronological order.*

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| Vol.   | Vol.   |
| I. The XVI. Century Painters.<br>With a note on the influence of Holbein.                          | XVI. Kauffman, Bartolozzi, and Zoffany. With a note on Foreign Members of the Royal Academy in 1768. |
| II. Cornelius Johnson and Jamesone.  | XVII. Downman and Dance.   |
| III. Dobson and Walker. With a note on the work of Van Dyck in England.                            | XVIII. Hoppner.  |
| IV. Lely and Kneller.  | XIX. Opie and Cosway.  |
| V. J. Riley, Greenhill, J. M. Wright, and Mary Beale.  | XX. Raeburn.   |
| VI. Thornhill, Jervas, Dandridge, Richardson, and Hudson.  | XXI. Rowlandson.   |
| VII. Hogarth.  | XXII. Morland and Ibbetson.  |
| VIII. Richard Wilson and Joseph Farington.   | XXIII. John (old) Crome. With a note on the Norwich School.  |
| IX. Reynolds.  | XXIV. Lawrence.  |
| X. Gainsborough.   | XXV. James Ward.   |
| XI. Romney.  | XXVI. Girtin and Bonington.  |
| XII. Wright of Derby.  | XXVII. Constable.  |
| XIII. Paul Sandby, Towne, Cozens. With a note on the rise of water-colour painting.                | XXVIII. Cotman.  |
| XIV. B. West, J. S. Copley, and G. Stuart. With a note on American painting in the XVIII. Century. | XXIX. Cox.   |
| XV. Barker of Bath, and the Bath Painters.   | XXX. De Wint.  |
|  | XXXI. Copley Fielding.   |
|  | XXXII. Bewick and Clarkson Stanfield. With a note on the Newcastle group.                            |
|  | XXXIII. Turner.  |
|  | XXXIV. Alfred Stevens.   |

OTHERS IN PREPARATION.





*Irlington House.*

*Dehoma Gallery.*

SELF - PORTRAIT.

Richard Wilson.





SELF PORTRAIT

1900-1901

EDITED BY  
S. C. KAINES SMITH, M.A.

---

By  
FRANK RUTTER, B.A.  
(Formerly Curator of the Leeds City  
Art Gallery. Author of *The  
Wallace Collection*, etc.)



NEW YORK

PUBLISHERS

*First Published in 1923*

*Made and Printed in Great Britain  
by  
Southampton Times Limited,  
Southampton*

## FOREWORD.

SAID Peter Pindar, ' Why have we not a life of Wilson, whose eye was as perfect in the perception of aerial nature as that of Claude, and whose ideas were of a much superior order of grandeur ? '

The perpetual association of the names of Wilson and Claude has done much to retard the appreciation of the English painter. It is rather an ironic chance that, while the name of a French classicist has overshadowed the reputation of the father of English landscape, it was France that first acclaimed the naturalism of Constable. The fatal tendency of the average Englishman to take his artistic opinions ready made from abroad has a good deal to do with it, but still more, I think, the Englishman's impatience of good craftsmanship, and his mistrust of sublimity in common things. It is the strain of idealism in Wilson that makes him a ' difficult ' artist ; so long as it is expressed in a foreign setting it can be taken for granted, but when it comes to finding it imported into familiar things, the Briton takes fright, and leaves the artist severely alone.

The result is that to the majority of us Wilson simply is not known as a painter of English landscape at all. To his contemporaries, when he ceased to be Italian, he ceased to be grand ; to us, because he is grand he is not English. And, consequently, he has had to wait even more than the

hundred years that Peter Pindar gave him, before coming into his own.

When I asked Mr Rutter to write this book, my own principal interest in Wilson arose from the debt which Crome owed to his influence, and I felt that there must be in Wilson some very noble quality to account for the great impulse that he gave to the inspired naturalism of the untaught Norwich lad. I earnestly desired to know that the 'landscape instinct' was spontaneous in Wilson and not merely imitative, and that the legacy which he left to Crome was of his own making, not merely a borrowed thing. Mr. Rutter has shown me that I was right in my belief that this was so, and there is nothing more pleasant than to be shown that one was right. Thus I am personally indebted to my old friend, and I trust that many readers will share that indebtedness, for they will find the obligation laid upon them in very pleasant fashion in these pages.

Farington lived a good life, and made a good end. He also made many friends, possibly a good many enemies, and some pleasant pictures. I cannot persuade myself that he was a great artist; but no one could write his life better than he wrote it himself. Mr. Rutter has brought together in a space commensurate with the artistic importance of his subject a scholarly little sketch of the man from the outside, which will render even more vivid the picture of the man from the inside that he himself gives us in his wonderful diary. He is fitly associated here with his master Wilson, and the affectionate loyalty of the superbly respectable 'Dictator of the Royal Academy' to the poor old

failure whom many people would have us believe to have been even disreputable—'old red-nosed Wilson'—is one of the most attractive traits in a character that approaches perilously near now and then to snobbishness.

I have to thank, as on previous occasions, the directors of many galleries for their kindness in helping me to compile a list of pictures by these artists in their respective galleries; if it is not invidious to particularise, I should like to offer my special thanks to Mr. Isaac J. Williams for information with regard to the pictures by Wilson in the National Museum of Wales, where, I am glad to know, Wilson is given the honour due to the first painter of Wales and of the beauty of Welsh landscape.

S. C. K. S.



## PREFACE.

THE careers of the two artists dealt with in these pages afford a strange and instructive contrast. One had talent, and prospered exceedingly; the other had genius—and starved. Fortune, whose favours were so unequally distributed between these two men during their lifetime, has shown herself since their death to be still capricious and unrepentant, reviving the memory of one with fresh honours and renewed attention, yet mercilessly turning a cold shoulder to the other's just plea for fame.

Exactly one hundred and one years after the death of Joseph Farington the newspapers of England were resounding his name and trumpeting his distinction as the diarist of his day; while in the very same month a public Art Gallery was opened in Cheshire in which so little respect was paid to the memory of Richard Wilson, and so slight an appreciation vouchsafed to his art, that Italian landscapes from his brush—full of beauty and refinement—were hung over doorways, in high places and dim corners, while honourable positions on the line were allotted to landscapes by painters immeasurably his inferiors.

There is little danger now that the pictorial work of Joseph Farington may be forgotten—its value is more likely to become inflated and overpraised—

but it is time that some effort were made to give to Richard Wilson the place that is his due.

Already it has become difficult to acquire any exact knowledge of Wilson's life. We know next to nothing of his boyhood, and little of his professional practice as a portrait painter in London before he went to Italy. The standard work on him is a hundred years old, and T. Wright's *Life of Richard Wilson*, published in 1824, though the best material print offers his biographer, is nevertheless an infuriating book, containing, at the best, less than fifty pages of solid information about Wilson, and more than two hundred pages of irrelevant anecdotes, 'experiences,' and descriptions. The best of it is summarised in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. It is on these authorities chiefly that the first chapter of this book has been based, though, since Wright is untrustworthy on several details, and his hearsay gossip, especially about Wilson's last years, has been too carelessly repeated and unwarrantably amplified by Redgrave and subsequent writers, it has been possible to correct certain popularly received legends about Wilson by more reliable authorities, notably Thomas Hastings' monograph published in 1825—which has been strangely neglected by previous writers on Wilson—and also Wilson's own memorandum book, preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, and occasional notes made by Wilson on some of his scattered sketches.

While the scope of this book forbids any attempt to be exhaustive, it is hoped that it may throw new light on certain passages in Wilson's life, and may indicate a line of enquiry which another

writer may more fruitfully follow. There is still much to learn from Wilson's portraits scattered over England, and about his eventful stay in Venice, where, on the evidence of his paintings, it seems clear to the present writer that he was far more influenced by Guardi than by Zuccarelli.

About Joseph Farington, a far lesser artist but an exceedingly interesting man, we have a wealth of material available for reconstructing his life. There is not only his own stupendous *Diary*, which covers his later years, but there is in the Victoria and Albert Museum a collection of a score of his sketch-books and note-books, including the first book he used in 1763, when he began to study painting under Richard Wilson. Thus we have ample authentic material for following his movements and development throughout the whole of his professional career, and a great deal of this has already been admirably summarised by Mr. F. Gordon Roe in his monograph on Joseph Farington as 'Dictator of the Royal Academy.'

Acknowledgments are made elsewhere to many who have helped me in the preparation of this work, but I wish to mention here some to whom my special thanks are due: to Captain Richard Ford for giving me free access to his unrivalled collection of Wilson's paintings and drawings, and for his kindness in lending me some scarce, early books about Wilson; to Mr. Bertram Nicholls for a number of most helpful and illuminating suggestions regarding Wilson's palette and method of painting; and to the authorities of the Royal Academy, of the British Museum Print Room, and of the Department of Painting and Engraving at

South Kensington, for much courtesy in permitting me to study such records of these artists as they possess.

My thanks are also due to Colonel M. H. Grant for much courtesy in showing me his fine collection of Wilsons—among which *Shrewsbury Bridge* bears every indication of being a pre-Italian landscape; to Dr George C Williamson for his kindness in lending me photographs and documents relating to the Wilson Exhibition at Brighton in 1920; to the Committee of the Garrick Club for permission to study the *Peg Woffington* portrait there; to the Director (Mr J. D Milner, F.S.A.) of the National Portrait Gallery for information about the Wilson portraits in that institution; to the King's Librarian at Windsor for assistance in searching the records for a trace of the alleged Privy Purse annuity to Wilson in his last years; to the Secretary of the Foundling Hospital, and, last but not least, to the old friend of my Cambridge days, Mr. S. C. Kaines Smith, Editor of this Series, for much valuable assistance in compiling the lists of works by Wilson and Farington on view in the British Art Galleries open to the public.

ROME,  
*April*, 1923.

F. R.

## CONTENTS.

### RICHARD WILSON.

|   | PAGE |
|---|------|
| CHAPTER I: BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL  | I    |
| „ II: CHARACTERISTICS, DEVELOP-<br>MENT, AND STYLE . . .                              | 47   |
| „ III: THE QUALITY OF THE ARTIST .  | 83   |
| APPENDIX I: LIST OF AUTHORITIES . . .   | 106  |
| „ II: LIST OF WORKS BY RICHARD<br>WILSON IN BRITISH GAL-<br>LERIES OPEN TO THE PUBLIC | 107  |
| „ III: LIST OF ENGRAVINGS AFTER<br>WILSON . . . . .                                   | 112  |

---

### JOSEPH FARINGTON.

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| CHAPTER I: BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL   | 117 |
| „ II: ASSOCIATIONS AND ACHIEVE-<br>MENTS . . . . .                                       | 142 |
| APPENDIX I: LIST OF AUTHORITIES . . .  | 158 |
| „ II: LIST OF WORKS BY FARINGTON<br>IN BRITISH GALLERIES OPEN<br>TO THE PUBLIC . . . . . | 158 |

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

### RICHARD WILSON

1. PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST (*Diploma Gallery, Roy Soc Arts*) . . . . . *Frontispiece*
2. LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES (*National Gallery*) . . . . . 30
3. J. H. MORTIMER, A.R.A. (*Diploma Gallery*) 62
4. THE THAMES AT TWICKENHAM (*Coll. of Capt. Richard Ford*) . . . . . 84
5. STUDY FOR 'THE TIBER' (*British Museum*) 98
6. LANDSCAPE: VIEW OF OXFORD (*Coll. of Capt. Richard Ford*) . . . . . 104

---

### JOSEPH FARINGTON.

- 1 LANCASTER FROM THE NORTH-EAST  
(*Victoria & Albert Museum*) . . . . . 124
2. LANDSCAPE WITH HORSEMAN (*British Museum*) . . . . . 156

RICHARD WILSON.

*Kind too late,  
Relenting Fortune weeps o'er Wilson's fate ;  
Remorseful owns her blindness, and to fame  
Consigns, with sorrow, his illustrious name.*

SIR MARTIN ARCHER SHEE, P.R.A.

## CHAPTER I.

### BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL.

RICHARD WILSON, the 'Father of British landscape-painting,' was born at Penegoes in Montgomeryshire on the first of August, 1714, the day on which Queen Anne died and George I. ascended the throne of England. Richard was the third son of a clergyman and, according to Wright, 'his father was of a very respectable family in that county, in which he possessed a small benefice, but was soon after the birth of our artist collated to the living of Mould in Flintshire; his mother was of the family of Wynne of Leeswold.' That the Rev. Mr. Wilson moved to Mould has been established, but it now seems to be doubtful whether he held that living.

Of the early life of Richard Wilson little is known. He was one of a large family, having five brothers and a sister, all of whom died unmarried. The circumstances of the family appear to have been straitened.

The eldest son, who outlived Richard, became a collector of customs in Mould ; the second followed his father's calling, became a clergyman and obtained preferment in Ireland ; the fourth went to America and died in Pennsylvania ; the fifth and youngest son was killed accidentally in childhood ; and the only daughter became attendant to Lady Sandown, a lady of the bed-chamber to Queen Caroline.

In the placing of the two eldest boys and of Miss Wilson we may reasonably trace the influence of the Wynne family, and the interest taken by the wife's family in the Wilsons is further evidenced by the fact that it was Sir George Wynne who took young Richard to London in 1729 and placed this lad of fifteen to learn painting under an obscure artist named Thomas Wright.\*

There is no record of Richard having

---

\* This artist must not be confounded with Wilson's biographer, nor with Wright of Derby. Conceivably he may have been a relative of Joseph Michael Wright (c. 1655-1700), also a portrait painter, whose *Hobbes* is in the National Portrait Gallery, but no contemporary or nearly contemporary reference to T. Wright can be found except the inscriptions under three prints by Vandergutch after Guido: 'In the collection of T. Wright,

attended any school, and it is supposed that he was educated by his father, who gave him a sound grounding in the classics; but Wright tells us nothing of his boyhood except that he showed that 'marked predilection for drawing,' which is associated—after the event—with every artist of eminence. Little importance, then, need be attached to stories of young Richard being 'frequently seen tracing, with a burnt stick, figures upon the wall.' The illuminating item in the anecdote is the 'burnt stick' which throws light on the financial situation of the family. Obviously Richard must have shown some more than usual promise as a draughtsman in order to move his relative Sir George to take him seriously and secure his art training in London.

Let us pause for a moment to consider the state of London as an art city in the year of Wilson's arrival. Most of us have got into the habit of associating Richard Wilson with Reynolds and Gainsborough as if they were

---

Painter, Covent Garden.' Redgrave mentions a portrait of some merit in the Bodleian Oxford, as tentatively ascribed to Thos. Wright, and an account of this painting of *Joseph Bowles* will be found in Mrs. Poole's *Catalogue of Oxford Portraits*.

all about the same age. This is a habit we must learn to correct. Richard Wilson belonged to an earlier generation; when he began to study portrait-painting with Wright, Reynolds was a little boy of six and Gainsborough was a babe of two. Wright of Derby was not born till five years later.

When Richard came to Town in 1729 there was only one painter of genius working in London, and none of the gentry and cultured connoisseurs thought much of William Hogarth, then thirty-two years old. He was considered 'a low fellow' who published his own prints, and, a few years before, had had the bad taste to satirise in *The Taste of the Town* the just respect which people of fashion entertained for singers with foreign names! Young Wilson at that time probably only heard of Hogarth as a vulgar engraver. Hardly anybody knew that Hogarth had begun to paint portraits, and though we are all wise enough now to know that the great art event of 1729 was Hogarth's painting of *Lavinia Fenton as Polly Peachum*, we may be certain that Wilson neither heard of nor saw it till many years later.

In 1729 Hogarth was hardly a fit subject

for conversation in polite society, though no doubt when the young people were out of hearing it was whispered behind fans how sad it was that the daughter of Sir James Thornhill had made a *mésalliance* and had married 'that dreadful Mr. Hogarth.'

Sir James Thornhill, of course, everybody knew and respected. He was not only an admirable painter of ceilings but a Knight Bachelor. His portraits perhaps were a little dull, even for a knight, and if you really wanted a first-class portrait there were only two men to whom you could go—'Friends of the great Mr. Pope, my dear madam'—Mr. Jonathan Richardson and Mr. Charles Jervas. To their contemporaries these were the two great portrait painters of the time; though a young man of twenty-eight, named Thomas Hudson, was beginning to be spoken about as clever in catching a likeness.

This, then, was the artistic atmosphere into which Richard Wilson entered in 1729, and for the next twenty years—so far as written testimony is concerned—his history is a complete blank. How long he stayed with Wright, whether he officially studied under any other painter, who gave him his

first commission—about none of these things have we any certain knowledge. It has been stated in recent years—but without any authority being given—that Wilson was a pupil of Hudson. The difference in age between the men—thirteen years—is enough to make the suggestion plausible; Hudson is just the man under whom an ambitious or well-advised young painter would place himself in the seventeen-thirties. But there is no proof of Wilson having been his pupil.

If we may judge by his own work—and his paintings are the most reliable information about Wilson that we possess—then the painter by whom Wilson was most influenced in his early portraiture was Jonathan Richardson (Hudson's father-in-law) who died in 1745. Evidence to support this hypothesis will be found in Richardson's portrait of himself at the National Portrait Gallery and in Richard Wilson's portrait of himself in the same gallery. Had Wilson never turned to landscape, but continued his practice as a portrait-painter, we may reasonably suppose that he would occupy to-day a position analogous to that of Richardson. Nor is that a position altogether

to be despised, for though Richardson is strangely forgotten to-day the quality of his paint is such that his merit does not depend on the caprices of fashion.

The detailed criticism of Wilson's portraiture must be reserved for subsequent consideration, but this much may be said at once : though his portraits have been neglected, overcleaned, and badly treated in many ways, enough remains to prove that of the true-born English painters-in-oils who *immediately* preceded him, only one was his superior—Hogarth—and one, Jonathan Richardson, possibly his equal. In the Diploma Gallery at Burlington House Wilson's portrait of himself hangs alongside portraits by Reynolds and many later men ; and it comes through the ordeal mighty well.

Little as we know about Wilson's practice as a portrait-painter it stands to reason that his work must have attracted notice and been held in some sort of consideration in order that he should be allowed to paint portraits of royalties towards the end of the 'forties. Doubtless his sister's connection with one of Queen Caroline's ladies of the bed-chamber was the means whereby Wilson was

introduced to the Royal Family—Wright distinctly says so—but he could hardly have been regarded still as a ‘youth of promise’ when he had turned thirty. As a matter of fact he was—for his real life’s work had not yet begun; the genius of Wilson was slow to develop—but commonsense compels us to recognise that he must already have achieved something when, in 1748, he was commissioned\* to paint a portrait group of the Prince of Wales and Duke of York with their tutor, Dr. Ayscough.

We judge no painter, living or dead, by his portraiture of royalty, but there have been many worse paintings of Princes of Wales than in Richard Wilson’s group, of which two versions exist, one in the National Portrait Gallery and another in the House of Lords.

Before emulating the example of the *Dictionary of National Biography* and gaily skipping from 1729 to 1749, we may pause to inquire whether in addition to his portraiture Richard Wilson painted any landscapes in England before he went to Italy. In the

---

\* Allan Cunningham says the Bishop of Norwich gave Wilson this commission in 1748. Cf. *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters*.

next chapter evidence will be given that he did, but in written records there is only shadowy evidence to be gathered. Alluding to J. S. Miller's engraving after Wilson's *View of Devon*, undated, Wright says that this picture is 'generally supposed to have been executed before he went abroad.' Commonsense again comes to the rescue, telling us that it is in the highest degree unlikely that a painter making his first effort at landscape, and sketching casually and unpremeditatedly in another man's house, should achieve a result so remarkable that it compels an experienced and capable landscape painter to a high pitch of enthusiastic admiration.

These stories are told in Vasari, but they do not happen in life.

We may conclude, then, that in the seventeen-forties Wilson had achieved some distinction as a portrait painter, and by the end of the decade was earning a sufficient income to enable him to save. Redgrave—on what authority is unstated—says Wilson continued under Wright for six years from 1729, and then 'commenced portrait painting on his own account.' Probably as a direct result of the versions of the royal portrait group

painted about 1748, Wilson found himself with enough money to fulfil the desire of every artist at every time—but especially in the eighteenth century—namely, to visit Italy. Wright adds that in this undertaking he had ‘the assistance of his relations,’ and possibly the Wynnes of Leeswold strengthened his purse in addition to supplying him with letters of introduction. Help may also have been received from his mother’s relative Lord Camden, who is said always to have addressed the painter as ‘Cousin Wilson.’ The printed gossip of the eighteenth century clearly proves that in middle life Wilson mixed with the best society and held his own among gentlefolk. He ‘was much respected by his countrymen abroad,’ says Wright.

Most of the biographers of Richard Wilson agree that he went to Italy in 1749 with no other intention than to perfect himself as a portrait painter. The exception is Mr. Thomas Hastings, a collector of H.M. Customs and an amateur etcher, who published in 1825 a volume of etchings after Wilson’s landscapes, together with a memoir of the painter. Mr. Hastings’ testimony, though hitherto unaccountably ignored, is

not to be despised. According to this writer Wilson went abroad deliberately to study landscape painting, and the first person to discover his genius in this direction was not Zuccarelli, but Mr. Lock, of Norbury Park : ' He discovered in Wilson the sparks of early genius for landscape painting, and which he rightly judged could only be brought to maturity on classic ground ! '

Although Hastings overstresses his point that a portrait painter had no need to go to Italy to study—why, then, did Sir Joshua Reynolds go?—yet his argument may be taken as evidence, firstly that Wilson had already inclined towards landscape painting before leaving England, and secondly, that his meeting with Mr. William Lock at Venice, and their subsequent journey together, was not the result of accident, but of a plan pre-arranged between Wilson and a friendly patron before he left England.\*

This is to some extent corroborated by a

---

\* Britton, in his *Fine Arts of the English School*, reports a statement by Lock's son suggesting that the friendship between his father and Wilson was founded while the latter was painting the former's portrait in Venice, but this evidence is not conclusive in any way.

still earlier writer, Robert Archer, an Oxford bookseller, who published, in 1811, a volume of *Studies and Designs by Richard Wilson*, and prefaced the reproduction of the sketches with a short account of Wilson's life. In this (page 3) he says : ' From Venice he went to Rome with William Lock, Esq., for whom he painted some pictures, and made many sketches of the interesting country through which they passed.'

It seems certain that the first Italian city at which Wilson made any considerable stay was Venice, but how he got there is far from certain. The writer's belief is that he travelled overland *viâ* the St. Gothard Pass and the Italian lakes, but the only shred of evidence which supports this theory is the little painting, *Lake of Como* (No. 1094) in the Glasgow Art Gallery. This appears to be an early work, the size of the panel—8½ by 9½ inches—corresponds to the *pochade* which a travelling painter might use for a travel note, and there is not the slightest suggestion to be found anywhere that after he had settled in Rome Wilson ever again went so far north in Italy. Altogether it seems to be a reasonable deduction that this little sketch was

painted by Wilson on his way to Venice, and consequently before he had his famous meeting with Zuccarelli.

Of this meeting far too much has been made. A piece of idle gossip, illustrating little more than the politeness of an Italian to an English colleague, it has been repeated over and over again till it has been magnified into an event which changed the whole course of Wilson's life. Shall we ignore the popular anecdotes of the eighteenth century and give our attention instead to certain facts about Venice in the year 1749?

The principal fact is that Zuccarelli was neither the only nor the most important painter then living and working in Venice. There were Tiepolo, aged fifty-five, Panini, aged fifty-four but mostly in Rome, Canaletto, aged fifty-two, and Francesco Guardi, a man two years older than Richard Wilson, whose work the English artist must have known and loved. That Wilson was to some extent influenced by Guardi there is ample evidence in dozens of paintings, and if more evidence be needed it can be found in a rare early Venetian drawing by Wilson in the Ford Collection, a wash drawing of an obvious

Guardi subject, with gondolas in the foreground and the Salute in the distance. One quite early Roman drawing, *Baths of Diocletian*, in the British Museum, shows Canaletto's influence, and other drawings of the Venice period, scenes about the Rialto, recall Guardi even in the way the figures are put in. A painter with Wilson's taste could never hesitate between allegiance to Guardi or to Zuccarelli. Claude, Guardi, and the Dutch School were the main artistic influences which shaped Wilson's style, and one proof of this is the fact that among such sketches as Wilson did in Venice which still survive, not one shows the slightest hint of Zuccarelli's influence. Nevertheless, to this thin slippery painter of superficial sugariness is given the credit of foster-fathering the thick, rich pigment of the Englishman's landscapes! Here is the universally accepted legend of Wilson's conversion to landscape :

One day, while waiting for the coming home of Zuccarelli, upon whom he had called at Venice, he made a sketch in oil from the window of the apartment, with which that artist was so highly pleased, that he strongly recommended him to apply himself to landscape painting.\*

---

\* T. Wright. *Life of Richard Wilson*, p. 3.

Presumably this was not the first time that Wilson had called on Zuccarelli, or surely he would never have permitted himself the liberty of sketching in a stranger's apartment. A bohemian artist of the twentieth century might so behave, but this sort of thing was not done by a gentleman in the eighteenth century. Equally presumably this was not the first sketch in oils of a landscape ever made by Wilson.

Redgrave says that Wilson made 'a stay of about twelve months in Venice,' and those must have been happy yet anxious days for the professional painter who had not yet quite made up his mind which road he would follow. He was no student, but an experienced painter of thirty-six, yet he must have relished the charm of Venice with a boyish zest and been constantly torn between the rival attractions of her art-treasures and the loveliness out-of-doors that pleaded to be painted.\* We may see Wilson doubtful, hesitating, wistful during those months at

---

\* 'Wilson, upon his arrival in Italy . . . having examined a picture in the morning, would compare its fidelity with nature in the evening. It was this that enabled him to acquire his bold and original style.'—*The Philosophy of Nature*. Anon. c. 1820.

Venice, conscientiously from time to time practising his portrait-painting and disheartened and dismayed when he compared his efforts with the achievements of Bellini and Lorenzo Lotto, turning surreptitiously for solace to all-healing Nature, furtively noting her colours and designs, drawn each day, without knowing it, further from the forms of man and nearer, closer still, to the bosom of Mother Earth.

The example and precept of Zuccarelli produced no revolution, but confirmed a tendency already acquired. The decision once made, Wilson, we know, journeyed southwards with his acquaintance, Mr. Lock, of Norbury, with whom, according to Redgrave, he 'visited several of the Italian cities, painting for him some sketches and landscapes, and continuing the journey to Rome.'

What were these cities? It is unlikely that Como was one of them because two paintings and a number of sketches indicate that the journey southwards was by the eastern coast. There is a painting, *View of the River Po*; in the Ford Collection are sketches of Ravenna, Cervia, Rimini, San

Marino and Pesaro ; a *View of Ancona* was formerly in the possession of a Mr. Hawkins. So far the route is clear, but after Ancona we can only guess. Probably thence they struck across country to Rome, and this theory is supported by one sketch of Foligno in the Ford Collection ; and it is conceivable that missing Perugia and Assisi—as he had missed Florence—Wilson made his way south-westward *viâ* Spoleto and Terni, and so saw the waterfall near that place on his way to Rome.

Allowing for a leisurely journey, we may surmise that Wilson and his friend, Mr. Lock, arrived at Rome some time in the late autumn of 1750.

In Rome a landscape painter was not the freak he then appeared to be in England. Claude and Poussin had shown the way ; France already had a tradition in landscape ; and its heir, Horace Vernet, was then in Rome. A celebrated painter, whose works were held in the highest estimation, whose worldly position was secure, and whose income was enviable, the mere example of the man was an incentive to landscape painting. To this, verbal encouragement was added. Vernet,

'happening one day, while both these artists were studying at Rome, to visit Wilson's painting room, was so struck with a landscape he had painted, that he requested to become the possessor of it, offering in exchange one of his best pictures. The proposal was readily accepted, and the picture delivered to Vernet, who, with a liberality as commendable as it is rare, placed it in his exhibition room, and recommended the painter of it to the particular attention of the cognoscenti, as well as to the English nobility and gentry who happened to be visiting the city. "Don't talk of my landscapes, when you have so clever a fellow in your countryman Wilson," was the observation of this liberal French artist.'\*

Wilson remained in Italy for six years. Of his stay there we have a few anecdotes but little detailed information. He settled in Rome, painting chiefly in the Campagna, and he added to his income by giving lessons, many of his pupils being amateurs of high social position. In April, 1754, when he visited Tivoli to make the sketch for his picture *Ruins of the Villa of Mæcenas*—now in the National Gallery—he was accompanied by the Earl of Pembroke, the Earl of Thanet, the Earl of Essex, and Lord Bolingbroke. In Rome he frequented the best society, and though young Joshua Reynolds trod close on his heels, coming to Italy in the same year

---

\* T. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

(1749) and remaining there for three years, it is beyond question that from about 1751 to the date of his departure Richard Wilson was the most famous English painter in Rome, and the one held in highest esteem both by residents and visitors. Better by far, Mr. E. V. Lucas reflects, had Wilson 'remained in his beloved Italy, for his happiest time was over.' \* Better perhaps for Wilson's personal comfort, but it was happy for British painting that Wilson returned to paint his English landscapes.

Reynolds and Wilson were not only in Italy at the same time, but they appear to have made some journeys there together. One of these excursions was to Terni—about half-way between Rome and Perugia—and Sir Joshua himself is the authority for what has become Wilson's most famous *mot.* Before the celebrated falls of Terni, a cascade 650 feet in height, and unrivalled in Europe for its beauty of situation and volume of water, Richard Wilson stood for a while in speechless admiration, and then Reynolds heard him break out with, 'Well done, water,

---

\* E. V. Lucas, *The British School*, p. 242.

by God ! ' The story was first printed in an anonymous book of gossip, entitled *Diary of an Invalid*, which appeared about the beginning of the nineteenth century.

In 1755 according to Wright and Redgrave, in 1756 according to the *Dictionary of National Biography* and later authorities, Wilson arrived home from Italy. Probably he started from Rome in 1755 and only reached London in 1756, for he travelled leisurely, in company with Lord Dartmouth, for whom he painted some landscapes, to Naples, and he spent some time painting in the bay of Naples before he made his way thence by sea to England.

Before he left Rome Wilson had 'swapped' pictures with other artists besides Vernet. Raphael Mengs, who was thought far more highly of then than he is now, had painted Wilson's portrait and given it to him in exchange for one of his landscapes. This is the portrait of Wilson most frequently reproduced, though, as a painting, it is not nearly so good as Wilson's picture of himself in Burlington House.

Wilson's reputation had preceded him to England. The fame of his landscapes and

the esteem in which he had been held in Rome were well known in London. His prospects ought to have been good, and after some months—which we may conjecture were spent in visiting his relations and earlier patrons—Wilson, about 1758, took up his residence in London, over the north arcade of the Piazza, Covent Garden, a locality which was familiar to him as being that in which he had doubtless lived with Wright in his younger days. His reception was less cordial than he had a right to expect, and most of his brother artists were cool towards him. An honourable exception was Paul Sandby, the ‘father of British water-colour art,’ a man twelve years his junior, who recognised his genius and recommended him to the Duke of Cumberland, for whom Wilson painted one of his numerous versions of *Niobe*.

Between 1760 and 1768 he exhibited over thirty pictures at the Society of British Artists. To the first exhibition of 1760, held at Spring Gardens, he sent his picture *Niobe*, which confirmed in London his Roman reputation as a landscape painter. ‘His fame gained him little employment,’\* and it is

---

\* *Dictionary of National Biography.*

doubtful if he ever again reached the financial prosperity he had touched in 1749, and later in Rome. His dwindling fortunes are betrayed by his changes of address. In 1771 he left Covent Garden for 36 Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square, and though the house then commanded views looking towards Hampstead and Highgate, the desire to be nearer the country was at least equalled by the need for stricter economy. In 1765 his *View of Rome from the Villa Madama* was bought from the exhibition by the Marquis of Tavistock, and three years later, when the Royal Academy was founded, George III. nominated Richard Wilson as one of the first members.

There is no evidence that at this time Wilson was in serious financial difficulties. He was not meeting with the reward his art deserved, he was certainly not prosperous, but he was still in touch with the Court and the nobility, and able to eke out a tolerable living by giving lessons and occasional sales.

From a note in his memorandum book at South Kensington we know that Wilson had the comfortable sum of £280 in Child's

Bank on the 25th July, 1771. His style of living appears to have been moderate and temperate, half-a-crown being the average amount spent on a dinner or a supper. Nowhere is there a trace of expenditure which would justify the fantastic and apparently baseless stories told by some writers of Wilson being 'a great drinker.' These seem to have arisen chiefly from Wilson's notorious preference for porter to wine or spirits, and to an ignorant abstainer with no learning in these matters, it appears incredible that stout should be the favourite tipples of a heavy drinker.

From the same source we learn that Wilson had some kind of illness in the following year. Under the date 25th November, 1772, there is an entry: 'Came from ye hospital.' Before this Wilson had already left the lodgings at Charlotte Street, where he began this book on 17th May, 1771, and entries show the expenditure of a guinea for another 'move' on 19th September, 1772, and of the same amount for another 'move' on 10th November, 1773. Still, there is no sign here of financial embarrassment; he is able to make small loans to a Mrs. Maddocks

(possibly a landlady) and to spend eighteen shillings on 'lace,' presumably as a present.

The real tragedy of Richard Wilson was not that he never knew what comfort and success may be ; his was the still more bitter experience of seeing the modest competence and success which had cheered his early manhood desert him bit by bit as he grew older, leaving him to endure privation, neglect, and penury in his old age.

To his first move, from Covent Garden to 36 Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square, made in 1771, we need not attach too much importance. To some extent, no doubt, it was a measure of economy, but it was still a good address, and since the house commanded views looking towards Hampstead and Highgate the change could be explained by the artist's natural desire to be nearer the country. But his change from this to Great Queen Street needs another explanation, though Wilson's worst days had not yet come. Since 1764 he had had a young scion of the squirearchy among his pupils, Joseph Farington, and about the time of this second move he had a still more profitable pupil, the wealthy young baronet Sir George Beaumont,

who was the best kind of pupil any artist can have—a pupil who not only paints, but buys pictures.

From its foundation in 1768 to 1780 Wilson exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy. He never appears to have had much financial success as an exhibitor ; he probably began with a small circle of patrons, and when their requirements in the matter of landscapes had been satisfied, gradually found it increasingly difficult to find new buyers. Such evidence as exists tends to show that Wilson's first years in London were his most prosperous, but that each year his sales dwindled, till after 1776 they fell away to almost nothing. From the list of his ' principal pictures,' compiled in 1824, it is clear that few patrons, except Lady Ford and one or two others, appreciated Wilson's English landscapes, and, before we reproach the painter for having so frequently repeated his Italian landscapes, we should remember that he was practically compelled to do so because these subjects alone were saleable.

From the memorandum book we get some idea of Wilson's prices and of the fate which awaited his English landscapes. Here is an

entry under the date of 11th September, 1775 :

Mr. Ruddock has a landskip *View in Wales*, value £15 15s.

Underneath this in Wilson's handwriting, but in another ink, comes the later entry, which needs no comment :

Had home since.

We shall probably not be far wrong if we assume that at this time, when he was sending out goods on approval and getting them returned, Wilson was beginning to get into serious money difficulties, and this would account for his putting the price on next year when he thought he had a sure sale, an ill-advised action which led to his undoing.

The crash came in 1776. To the Academy of that year Wilson sent *A View of Sion House from Kew Gardens*. George III. thought of buying it, and chose Lord Bute to be his intermediary. The Scottish peer interviewed the painter and asked him what the price was.

'Sixty guineas,' said Wilson.

'Too much,' was the reply.

Then said Wilson, 'If His Majesty cannot

pay the sum at once, I will take it in instalments.'

Heaven knows what this reply had grown into by the time it reached the Royal ears. At all events, it cost Wilson the small amount of Court favour he had hitherto retained.

Some narrators (Redgrave included) have dated this incident prior to the foundation of the Royal Academy. This antedating cannot be accepted. In the first place, it is incredible that after it the King should have nominated Wilson as one of the first foundation members of the Royal Academy. In the second place, the picture in question was not exhibited till 1776. In the third place, its effect on Wilson's fortunes was immediate.

In 1777 Wilson moved to meaner lodgings at 24 Norton Street, and about two years later sunk still lower to Great Titchfield Street. After 1776 he was cold-shouldered by most of his brother Academicians, and his appearances at Burlington House became fitful and less frequent.

In 1779 he only showed one picture. After 1780 he ceased to exhibit. Fortunately, just before the catastrophe, on the death of Hayman in 1776, he sought and obtained the

position of Librarian to the Royal Academy, and, once appointed, even Court disfavour could not rob him of the post. The paltry salary attached to this office, about £50 per annum, saved Wilson from starvation. Sir William Beechey thought 'his manner of living was very poor and not at all beyond it.'

This saying of Beechey is reported by a Mr. Field, who was a friend of Thomas Wright, and is perfectly credible. Wilson did not touch bottom in Great Titchfield Street.

His last abode in London was at a mean house in Tottenham Street, Tottenham Court Road, in which he occupied the first and second floors, almost without furniture.\*

His furniture had followed his pictures, for there is only too much evidence that 'in spite of his reputation the pawnbrokers were his principal customers.'† Once, when he did have a commission for a picture, he was unable to execute it because he had no paints and no money with which to buy them. It is said that in these last years he had only

---

\* T. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

† *Dictionary of National Biography.*

one paint brush, with which he did everything. Small wonder that he despairingly asked James Barry,\* an Academician, young enough to be his son, 'Do you know anyone mad enough to employ a landscape painter?'

By the irony of fate the very man who urged him to become a landscape painter took the bread out of his mouth. Zuccarelli, who had settled in London, pleased the contemporary taste better with his sugary landscapes.

Insult was added to injury. After the King had declined to purchase *Sion House from Kew Gardens*, a gang of busybodies constituted themselves into a self-appointed Committee of Taste. They were headed by Edward Penny, R.A.,† who was requested to communicate the following resolution to the person whom it concerned: '*That the manner of Mr. Wilson was not suited to the*

---

\* Not Barret, as erroneously stated by Fletcher and other writers.

† Edward Penny, R.A. (1714-1791), was a fashionable subject painter of the day, dimly remembered now by engravings of his *Death of General Wolfe*. Shortly after exhibiting his popular pair, *The Profligate Punished* and *The Virtuous Comforted*, he 'married a lady of property' and retired from his picture-business.

*English taste, and that if he hoped for patronage he must change it for the lighter style of Zuccarelli.'*

Mr. Penny then proceeded to recite the resolution to the greatest living master of landscape :

Wilson, who was painting at the time, heard it in silence, and went on with his work, but soon turned round, and very coolly, and in the most contemptuous manner, gave such an answer to Mr. Penny as sufficiently showed the thorough indifference in which he held this self-constituted Committee of Taste.\*

Nothing could break Wilson's spirit, but his health was thoroughly broken by his poverty and hardships. His chief sustenance during these years of his decline was bread and porter, and—alas! but can we wonder?—more porter than bread. Almost at the end cruel fortune relented, and he had a few months of peace, happiness, and tranquillity before death came. In 1781 Wilson left London and returned to his old home in Wales. Redgrave says, 'He unexpectedly became possessed of a small property near Llanberis on the death of his

---

\* T. Wright, *op. cit.*, p. 72.



*National Gallery*

LANDSCAPE WITH FIGURES



brother,' and this is followed by the *Dictionary of National Biography*, which tells us that he 'inherited his brother's small estate at Llanberis.' But who was this brother, and where was this estate? Wright's personal testimony is confined to the report of a conversation he had with an old gardener in Wales, Richard Lloyd, who in his younger days had been Richard Wilson's attendant at Colomondie :

According to this man's account, the finances of our artist at the time of his decease were not so confined as has been reported, he having succeeded to some property upon the death of his brother. It was in consequence of this acquisition, and the declining state of his health, that he determined to remove from the metropolis, and spend the remainder of his days in his native country.

It will be observed that Wright speaks vaguely of 'some property'—which might mean anything—and says not a word of any 'small estate near Llanberis.' The only brother likely to have land in this district was the eldest, the tax-collector at Mould, and he was still alive two years after Richard Wilson's death. Was it the Irish clergyman? It seems far more probable that any legacy Richard received came from his younger

brother, the one who died in America. Indeed, this Wilson, who was connected with the tobacco trade, is the most likely member of the family to have had anything to leave.

Hardly more important than the servant's evidence is a report by a friend of Wright, a Mr. Field, who supplied that biographer with a number of anecdotes, most of which were obtained from Sir William Beechey. Mr. Field says :

Previously to his (Wilson's) finally leaving London, which took place in consequence of the death of his brother, who left him an estate, on which it turned out there was a lead mine, he went to take leave of Sir William Beechey, and though he was in pretty good spirits at the prospect of comfort before him, his faculties and health were much impaired, and he put his hands on each side of his back, in which he suffered at the time, and, with a shake of the head, said very expressively " Oh, these back settlements of mine."

Wright, who makes no comment of his own, does not seem to realise that this report, printed on page 76, may be interpreted as contradicting his own statement on page 1 : ' The elder son . . . died two years after the painter,' and that an identification of the brother who died is due to the reader.

These are the foundations on which subsequent accounts have been based, and they

do not appear to be very good evidence. Was there any legacy at all? This is a matter on which it is doubtful if we can rely entirely on Wright, who was so painfully genteel that he makes every possible effort to conceal the poverty of Wilson and minimise the privations of his last years in London. He becomes positively ludicrous in his attempts to show that Wilson's frequent change of quarters was due to his having 'more regard, perhaps, to his love of landscape than to his pecuniary circumstances.' This is calmly stated as if it would explain satisfactorily why Wilson moved from lodgings amid 'the fields of Mary-la-Bonne' to Foley Place, Great Portland Street.

Was the legacy a pious fiction to disguise the fact that Wilson owed the quiet of his final days to the bounty of his friends and relatives? There is nothing to contradict this theory in Wright's final biographical details :

The last years of Wilson's life were passed with his brother in Mould, and with his relation, the late Mrs. Catherine Jones, of Colomondie, near the village of Llanverris, now called Loggerheads, a few miles from Mould. At the time of his residence in that neighbourhood he had nearly lost his

memory, and was reduced to a state of childishness. Richard Lloyd, a servant living not many years ago at Colomondie, attended him in his last moments. He at first complained only of a cold, but upon retiring to bed, almost immediately expired. His remains are interred in the churchyard at Mould, near the north door of the church. A gravestone has been erected within these few years by Mrs. Garnons,\* upon which is the following inscription, *viz.* 'The Remains of Richard Wilson, Esq., Member of the Royal Academy of Artists, interred May 15th, 1782, aged 69.'

Robert Archer, writing in 1811—*i.e.*, thirteen years earlier than Wright—says nothing of any legacy, but, after mentioning Wilson's appointment as Librarian of the Royal Academy, concludes:

He retained this situation till the decline of his health compelled him to retire to his brother's house in Wales, where he died in May, 1782.†

Finally we come to the evidence of Mr.

---

\* Miss ('Mistress') Garnons was a niece of Wilson's relative, Mrs. Catherine Jones, and 'Colomondie' was bequeathed to her by her aunt. This fact is plainly stated by Wright (p. 7), yet so carelessly has his book been read that some commentators allude to this lady's aunt as if, instead of being the house-owner, she had been a mere housekeeper to Richard Wilson.

† Robert Archer, *Studies and Designs by Richard Wilson* (Oxford, 1811).

Thomas Hastings, who in 1825, one year after the publication of Wright's *Life*, wrote :

When, from infirmity, he (Richard Wilson) was under the necessity of relinquishing his professional avocations, the King of England granted him an annuity from his Privy Purse ; with which he retired into Wales, and in May, 1782, in the sixty-eighth year of his age, amid the scenes of his early youth, ended his peaceful days.\*

Mr. Thomas Hastings, a collector of His Majesty's Customs and a personal friend of Lady Ford, was as likely to know the truth about Richard Wilson's last years as any servant.

It would be pleasant to think that George III. repented of his niggardly action over *Sion House from Kew Gardens*, and it is easier to understand Wilson retiring on an annuity from the Privy Purse than to penetrate the mystery which surrounds his alleged legacy. To accept the statement of Ernest Hastings and hold all others to be incorrect is decidedly tempting, but unfortunately there is nothing to confirm it. In reply to a request, the King's Librarian very kindly caused a search

---

\* Thomas Hastings, *Etchings from the Works of Richard Wilson, With Some Memoirs of His Life* (London . Hurst, Robinson & Co., 1825).

to be made among the Privy Purse records of George III. at Windsor Castle, and he states, 'The name of Richard Wilson is not to be found among them.' This, of course, is only negative evidence, and there is no certainty that Wilson was not the recipient of his sovereign's bounty in some form or another ; but just as Hastings' statement helps to shake our faith in the legacy story, so the want of any corroborative testimony prevents us from accepting his version without further question.

Nevertheless, it is wrong to ignore the account given by Hastings for, if it does nothing else, it proves that among those who made some study of Wilson's life and art and were in touch with people who had been acquainted with him, two stories were current as to the source of his means of existence in his last years. Regarding all the circumstances, the probabilities, and the evidence so far brought forward, one feels that at this moment the only verdict an impartial jury could return is *Non Liquet*.

As showing how the biographies of Wilson have sometimes gone astray, an anecdote

related by Wright may profitably be compared with a later version. Wright tells this story as he received it from Miss Garnons of Colomondie :

In the grounds belonging to this place, at some distance from the house, was a large stone, to which Wilson, in the latter part of his life, often resorted, it being a favourite seat with this great observer of nature. During his rambles it was frequently his custom to be attended by a Newfoundland dog, and it so happened that one day, accompanied by his faithful companion, the aged painter slipped from the stone upon which he had been seated, and, unable to recover himself, *would, in all likelihood, have perished on the spot, had not timely assistance arrived.* The sagacious animal, seeing the situation of his master, ran howling to the house, and, soliciting the attention of the servants with significant looks, pulling at the same time the skirts of their clothes with his teeth, directed them to the spot, and thus was the means of *rescuing his helpless master from a situation of considerable danger.*

Certain passages in this extract have been italicised by the present writer because what was evidently told by Miss Garnons as an illustration of canine intelligence, has been converted by later writers into a story showing the romantic circumstances of Wilson's end. Passing through other hands, and growing a little no doubt with each repetition, the dog story is thus related by Mr.

Beaumont Fletcher in his book *Richard Wilson*, R.A. (p. 160), published in 1908 :

It is said that he had strolled into the grounds, and made his way to his accustomed haunt beneath a fir-tree, when he suddenly fell, and, being unable to rise again, might have been left to die there had it not been for the sagacity of his only companion, a dog, which was a favourite with him. The animal ran barking to the house, and thus drew attention to the spot where the great painter lay prostrate. He was removed to the house, where he lingered for a day or two.

There is nothing in Wright's *Life* to connect this story with Wilson's death, nothing to show what interval of time intervened between it and his death. All we can learn from Wright is that Wilson died in his bed—peacefully and painlessly, let us hope. Wright is not a satisfactory biographer, but he is the best Wilson as yet has had.

Another example of the way in which legends about Wilson have grown is the distortion of Wright's innocent and no doubt truthful remark :

When Wilson was painting the *Ceyx and Aloyone*, he consulted the broken surface and rich hues of a large decayed cheese for ideas of form and colour.

This has developed into the oft-repeated story that Wilson once painted a picture *with*

Stilton cheese—and, of course, porter! Gandy, the West Country painter, who was Wilson's contemporary, is reported by Reynolds as having said that a picture ought to have a surface like a rich cream cheese, and there was nothing extravagant in a painter regarding a cheese for ideas of design and surface-quality. The correct anecdote, as given by Wright, was first published in *Carey's Thoughts*, and there is no reliable testimony that Wilson ever mingled dairy-produce with his pigment.

There is, indeed, no lack of printed gossip about Wilson, but unfortunately nearly all the descriptions of his appearance and character which have come down to us only tell us what Wilson was like in his later years. As regards his appearance, there is every reason to accept Wilson's portraits of himself as honest delineations. They are supported by the uninspired but rather more flattering portrait of him by Mengs. That his appearance, and possibly his habits, changed during his final years in London there is only too much reason to believe. Wright tells us particularly that '*during the latter years of*

*his life* his face became red, and was covered with blotches.' This is supported by the testimony of Mr. Wright's acquaintance, Mr. Field, who wrote :

As the fortunes of Wilson declined (I had it from one who, when living, knew him intimately) his manners and language became gross and depraved, of which his appearance, as he grew old, partook. His nose became very large and red, so much so that boys in the street would call after him '*Nosey*,' with which he was greatly annoyed. These adverse points in the person and character of Wilson arose, probably, from a degradation as naturally attendant upon sinking into poverty as their antagonist vices are upon the degenerating influences of extreme riches.

Even if we grant that after 1776 Wilson was tempted to drown his troubles in drink, it is uncharitable, to say the least, that a man who from all accounts appears to have led a normal, sober, and industrious life for sixty years, should for this lapse be stigmatised as a tippler and drunkard. Wilson's own works give the lie to any theory that he had habitually been an excessive drinker.

Further, Mr. Field gives us the testimony of Sir William Beechey, who said that when Wilson visited him 'he would rarely take anything more than a sandwich, without wine or ardent spirit; but if a tankard of

porter, with a toast in it, were placed before him, it was irresistible, and he would partake of it when he had refused everything else, *but not to excess.*'

Similarly, we may discount a great deal that has been written about Wilson's manners. Here again it is our fate to hear stories dating only from the end of his career, when the man was not unnaturally soured, and his tongue had been sharpened by adversity. From the movements and associations of his early and middle life it is obvious that Wilson must have had the deportment and the manners of an educated gentleman.

Many versions of his brush with Sir Joshua are told, the commonest being that at an Academy banquet Sir Joshua Reynolds proposed the health of Gainsborough as 'Our best landscape painter,' whereupon Wilson interposed, 'Our best portrait painter.' Mr. Field's version, which has a more convincing ring of truth, is that in 1774 (when Gainsborough came from Bath to London) Reynolds met Wilson at the Turk's Head, and casually asked if he had heard that 'the first landscape painter in England' was come to town. To which Wilson promptly retorted,

'You mean the best portrait painter, Sir Joshua.' This sounds like the chaff we might expect, and it is childish to twist the story into an exhibition of malevolence. Wright gives both versions, just as he quotes without comment in another part of his book Beechey's report that Wilson's brother left him an estate, 'on which it turned out there was a lead mine.' But Wright's *Life* is full of contradictions and inconsistencies, and the reader must sift his stories for himself.

Perhaps the truest as well as the liveliest impression of Wilson's character is given in an entertaining and very characteristic early nineteenth century publication entitled *Wine and Walnuts, or After-Dinner Chit-Chat*. Here an admirably spirited account is given of a supper-party at the Garricks', among the guests being Richard Wilson, Sterne, Oliver Goldsmith, and, of course, Dr. Johnson. The ladies had been kept waiting by the gentlemen, and punished them by telling them they had been likened to 'plants, fruits, and flowers,' and bidding them to guess which. Wilson guessed rue, or perhaps crab-apple, for Garrick, he said, had dubbed him 'Sour Dick.' Wilson was told he was wrong.

‘Will you give it up?’ said Miss ——. ‘Yea, madam.’ ‘Why, then, sir, you are likened to olives. Now, sir, will you dare to enquire further?’ ‘Let me see,’ said Wilson, all eyes upon him. ‘Well, then, my dear, out with it. I dare!’ ‘Then know, sir,’ said she, rising and curtsying most gravely ‘Mister Wilson is rough to the taste at first, tolerable by a little longer acquaintance, and delightful at last’ ‘Art thou content, friend Richard?’ said Johnson. ‘That is very handsome, sir.’ Wilson never looked so becomingly before; he made the damsel his best bow. ‘Faith,’ said he, ‘I shall henceforth have a better opinion of myself. I drink to you, my dear, and should be proud to give your hand to one deserving of your superior merits.’

Sir William Beechey, who was a great friend of Mr. Field, told him some reminiscences of Wilson’s painting habits, but is reticent as to his personality. Thus we learn that Wilson ‘painted standing, made a touch or two, and then walked to the window to refresh his eye, which was extremely delicate, and critically nice for colour.’ He frequently receded from his picture to view it, and on one occasion drew Beechey to the further corner of the room, observing, “This is where you should view a painting, with your eyes and not with your nose.”

For the rest, we are told Wilson ‘was taciturn and sententious, and though not of gentle speech or demeanour, and although

disappointed and soured in mind, he did not indulge in calumny, nor question the dispensation of Providence ; which denotes in him a natural benevolence of heart.'

Wilson's supposed roughness of manners has probably been exaggerated, but we may well believe that even as a younger man he was impatient of incompetent criticism, and, when nettled, apt to show his displeasure without any regard for the social position of the offender. He was too independent and honest to know 'which side his bread was buttered,' and his outspoken candour shocked the toadies of the time. Much that passed in current gossip as 'Wilson's rudeness' was, in truth, we may imagine, well-merited rebuke. In all ages there have been critics ever ready to find fault and to teach artists their own business, but the brand of connoisseur produced in the eighteenth century must have been peculiarly irritating and offensive to a painter sensitive and far from vain, but conscious of his integrity. There was, for example, the Duke of Bridgewater, who originally commissioned Wilson to paint a landscape illustrating the story of Niobe, and then, when it was finished,

disliked Wilson's figures, and employed an Italian artist, the 'well-known' (then) Platina da Constanza, to alter the figures to his ducal liking.

From the incident of this interfering duke has grown the legend that Wilson 'employed' other painters to put figures in his landscapes. That on rare occasions he permitted them to do so on compulsion from patrons is just barely conceivable, but that he should ever have *desired* any other artist to put in figures for him is utterly incredible. Apart from all his portraits, there is ample evidence that Wilson had a thorough knowledge of the figure, and we can see how beautifully he himself puts them in when we look at his drawings as well as his paintings.

With the figures for the *Niobe* Wilson evidently took great pains and trouble. In the Print Room at the British Museum there is a lovely little drawing (No. 13 L.B.), a study for the *Children of Niobe*, which shows how exquisitely Wilson could suggest the movement of a running figure, and how graceful was his sense of form. These figures are not Italian; they are pure Greek.

It may be, as Mr. Beaumont Fletcher has

suggested, that Wilson's ' unbending nature ' cost him the loss of ' a good deal more patronage ' ; in that case, so much the worse for the patrons. Incidents of this character in no wise lower our opinion of Wilson ; they make us admire him the more.

There was a better portrait painter than Sir William Beechey who had a still higher opinion of Richard Wilson. John Hoppner, R.A., knew the truth about this matter, and he spoke it out with an impetuous eloquence all his own, and with an honest candour worthy of his subject. This is what Hoppner wrote, and as an epitaph on Wilson it has never been surpassed :

The man whose genius outstrips the age in which he lives has the choice of two things—either to pander to the prevalent taste for present gain, or, by the best exertion of his faculties, secure to himself, as far as man may, the approbation of posterity. If this neglected artist, among his many privations, could not reckon deafness, nor in his list of acquirements enumerate pliability, it was still most absurd in his more polished patrons, however they might lament the ' unsuavity of his manners,' to forego, on that account, the pleasure of possessing his works, and encumber themselves with the vulgar art of Barret.\*

---

\* *Hoppner's Essays on Art*, edited by Frank Rutter, 1908, p. 70

## CHAPTER II.

### CHARACTERISTICS, DEVELOPMENT, AND STYLE.

THERE are few pursuits in which the pastime of follow-my-leader is more assiduously practised than in art criticism. Until respect for persons is replaced by an intelligent valuation of paintings accomplished, there will always be a tendency to pay more attention to the name of a painter than to the quality of the thing painted. Custom and tradition—that is to say, age-long publicity—have established certain names as being great in art, and, like the critic in *Fanny's First Play*, there are always plenty of people willing to argue that 'if it is by a good painter it's a good painting.' If the painter has been less extensively advertised, then, on the same analogy, the painting must be less good.

Some day, no doubt, a courageous critic will attempt a re-valuation of British painting during the eighteenth century, and when he has accomplished his task, paying no heed

to names, but searching out qualities and defects in the paintings themselves, then we may anticipate that some of the lesser known artists will be ranked higher, and some of the 'best known' lower, than they are in general estimation to-day.

No painter has less to fear and more to hope from such a re-valuation than Richard Wilson, who, for over a century, has been the victim of a 'received opinion.' For no better reason than because classicism was to the taste of the eighteenth century it has been assumed that the Italian landscapes were the most important productions of Richard Wilson; it has been assumed that his portraits were 'mediocre,' and of no account; and, finally, without any proper examination of his work before or after, it has been taken for granted that his visit to Italy was the making of his art. The moment we ignore all the written commentaries on his pictures, and confine our attention to the actual pre-Italian and post-Italian paintings, we find very little evidence to support any of these suppositions.

His portraits are not mediocre—far from it; the English landscapes are quite as

important as, possibly more important than, the Italian landscapes ; and it is perfectly open to argument that, instead of being the turning-point of his painting career, the visit to Italy was only an incident in, perhaps an impediment to, an inevitable progress from the moment Wilson began to paint. It is not to anecdotes about Zuccarelli, but to Wilson's own paintings, that we must turn to learn what effect, if any, the visit to Italy had on his painting.

Of all his paintings the most informative in this respect are two portraits of himself, one in the National Portrait Gallery, certainly painted before Wilson went to Italy, and the other, painted somewhere about 1768, in the Diploma Gallery of the Royal Academy. The latter and later portrait is the logical sequel to the former, and, like it, is far more Dutch than Italian in style.

The late Sir Hugh Lane, with his rare acumen, discovered this early self-portrait of Wilson, and presented it to the National Portrait Gallery. His find is of the utmost importance, for it forms a key-picture to Wilson's earlier practice. There is no subject which a painter can handle

with more complete freedom and liberty than a portrait of himself, and a self-portrait can be relied on to reveal the painter's secret aims and ideals. In this portrait, painted when he was in the early thirties, Wilson shows his love of realism and his respect for Jonathan Richardson. The vigour of the modelling, particularly of the jaw and lower portion of the face, is remarkable, and if we compare the grey shadows in the cheek and chin with those in the *Portrait of George Vertue* by Jonathan Richardson in the same gallery, the close relation of the two painters cannot fail to be recognised. Already Wilson's colour is cleaner and brighter than Richardson's, but the methods are similar.

We may assume, then, that it was Richardson (c. 1665-1745), and not his son-in-law Thomas Hudson (1701-1779), who was Wilson's earliest influence so far as painting portraits was concerned. He chose the better model, for Richardson's work has a richness, a robustness, and a quality that we do not find in Hudson. Since Cézanne-worship became popular we have heard much of the importance of 'volume' in painting, but this precious quality is not the monopoly of the

extreme moderns ; it will be found in heads by Richardson and Wilson, though not in those by Hudson, whose figures lack solidity, weight, and the rounded sense of bodily form.

Another portrait traditionally ascribed to Wilson is the *Mrs. Woffington* (No. 425) in the Garrick Club, London, and though it is not officially described as his in the club's catalogue, the internal evidence is so strong in his favour that it can unhesitatingly be accepted as an authentic Richard Wilson. Clearly it is not an early work, but a portrait painted *after* his return from Italy. This is manifest from the character of the painting, which is more Venetian in style than any of Wilson's other portraits, and it is confirmed by the age of the sitter. This thoughtful person is not a young woman. When Wilson went to Italy in 1749 Peg Woffington was only twenty-eight or nine ; she died when she was forty ; and we may conclude, therefore, that Wilson painted her portrait soon after he returned to London, probably in 1758.

The colour-scheme of this portrait is particularly sumptuous and original, the dominant note being the deep, rich greens of the dress, varied by warm maroon shadows and

the arabesques of the material's gold pattern. The flesh painting of the bosom has that soft golden glow we so often see in Wilson's skies, and the grey shadows round the lips are similar to, though more subtle than, the greys we find in his self-portrait at the National Portrait Gallery. The pearl pendant worn by the sitter is a deliciously painted piece of still-life, and the arrangement of this half-length—the slightly drooping head, the arm resting on the table, the open book in the foreground—is both rhythmical in design and tenderly expressive of the character of the sitter.

Taken in conjunction with the *Lord Egremont* (c. 1757) in the Dulwich Gallery, the *Mortimer* and the portrait of the artist in the Diploma Gallery, this *Mrs. Woffington* definitely establishes the fact that Wilson after his return from Italy occasionally painted portraits—just as before his visit to Italy he occasionally painted landscapes—and there is a strong probability that other portraits, now masquerading under other names, will eventually be recognised as the work of Wilson.

On the other hand, a painting by Wilson

which may be dated with tolerable certainty as prior to his Italian visit is the portrait of *Admiral Thomas Smith* in Greenwich Hospital. Edwards, in his *Anecdotes of Painters* (p. 80), says Wilson did this 'before he went abroad,' and, though this writer is unreliable, on this occasion he appears to have spoken the truth. In the Print Room of the British Museum there is a drawing (No. 1 L.B.) which is a study for this portrait. Strongly drawn and modelled in black and white chalk on brown paper, its clean severity hardly prepares us for the opulence and glowing colour of the painting. We can trace the Kneller tradition in the drawing, but in the painting it is altogether masked by a richness and velvety quality entirely Wilson's own. This half-length of the gallant seaman, known as 'Tom of Ten Thousand,'\* appropriately shown against

---

\* Admiral Thomas Smith earned his nickname 'by having, when First Lieutenant of the *Gosport*, in the absence of his Captain, fired into a French ship in the Channel, and demanded the compliment of lowering the top-gallant sails.' As a result he was dismissed the service, but was afterwards re-instated, appointed Captain in 1730, Rear-Admiral in 1747, Vice-Admiral in 1748, and Admiral in 1757. Smith, who died in 1762, was president of the court-martial on Admiral Byng.

a stormy sky, is unique in Wilson's practice for its handling of red, for this colour—so sparingly used by Wilson in his landscapes and most of his known authentic portraits—is here the dominant note of the scheme. It is provided by the wide expanse of waist-coat, and this colour, notoriously difficult to manage, is so handled that, with all its brilliant vividness, it is soft as the pile of plush. There is air all round the head—as there is in all Wilson's portraits—and the turn of it and the gesture of the admirably drawn hand are full of character and dignity. This sailor is splendidly alive, and of how many of the painted seamen at Greenwich can so much be said?

It is difficult to believe that writers who ignore or sneer at Wilson's portraits have made any close study of them. The works already mentioned are not Wilson's supreme achievements in portraiture, but their merits are so conspicuous that we cannot reconcile them with the verdict of Mr. Beaumont Fletcher, who, writing in 1908, says of them :

Wilson's work as a portraitist was, at its best, inferior. . . . He could not attain in portraiture to a more than mediocre level. . . . Artistically,

he was as ill at ease with countenances as he was, socially, with the owners of them. . . . Though they seem to have been all good likenesses, they all lack enchantment. They are entirely wanting in mystery. There is truth of resemblance in them, but not truth of reference—of idea, of sentiment. There is nothing left in the representation for thought to play upon. They are not addressed to imagination and sympathy. They convey no suggestion that the originals of them were good company to live with. . . . There is nothing exactly *heavenly* in any of Wilson's portraits; they have mostly force and truth in them, but no beauty. They have all Wilson's realism, but none of his higher qualities. . . . Wilson, in short, as a portrait painter, even at the age of nearly forty, was an undeveloped artist; his long practice of portraiture was a mere preliminary drudgery in the executive part of painting; the representative part was supplied only by his landscapes.\*

What is intended by the last sentence? Wilson's portraits are 'good likenesses,' but they lack a 'representative' something which Mr. Fletcher finds in his landscapes. There is little profit, however, in attempting to analyse the sentences above quoted, for they display a manifest misapprehension, not only of Wilson, but of his art. An unsympathetic eye will never be enchanted, for enchantment, like beauty, must already dwell in the eye of the beholder before it can be reflected

---

\* Beaumont Fletcher, *Richard Wilson, R.A.*, 1908, pp. 47-48, 57, 83.

from the surface beheld. Sentiment is a matter of opinion ; technique is a matter of knowledge. Mr. Fletcher does not discriminate between these two appeals in every work of art, the appeal of sentiment and the appeal of craftsmanship ; but he defends his assertion that there is ' no beauty ' in Wilson's portraits by the following sentence :

If such a standard of beauty involve a further reference to the style drawn and developed by the Reynolds-Gainsborough tradition in the first place from Van Dyck, then Wilson's deficiency becomes plainer than ever.\*

Does it? The long and short of the argument appears to be that Wilson's portraits are not like Van Dyck's portraits, therefore they are inferior. No more are Hogarth's, and are they also inferior? After all, Van Dyck is not everything, and it may be argued, on the other side, that his was a trashy tradition. Van Dyck had the supreme command of gentility, but in other respects his sentiment is as inferior to that of Hals and Rembrandt as his technique is inferior to that of Velasquez. The real value of Mr. Fletcher's criticism is his unconscious admission that

---

\* *Ibid.*, p. 82.

in his portraiture Richard Wilson broke away from the Van Dyck-Lely-Kneller tradition, and drew closer to the portraiture of the Netherlands, thereby drawing nearer also to the more truly native portraiture of Cornelius Johnson and Hogarth.

The grossest of all the many misapprehensions about Wilson is that which regards him as having drawn his most fertile inspiration from the art of Italy. The most wonderful thing about him is that, notwithstanding a sojourn of six years in that country, he was not overwhelmed and corrupted by Italy as so many other artists—Barker of Bath for example—have been. With the exception of a few direct commissions like the *Villa of Mæcenæ, Tivoli*, and the *Destruction of Niobe's Children*—which no future historian will dream of including among his most important paintings—Richard Wilson escaped the perilous pretension of attempting 'the grand style.' Keeping loyal to his old loves, he returned to England the same honest, thorough, fastidious, and clear-sighted exponent of the sane-and-sweet style that he was when he left. It is open to doubt whether the

stay in Italy did Wilson any good as a painter, but the marvel is that it did not do him any harm.

Proofs of Wilson's loyalty to his old ideals are not wanting, either in portraiture or in landscape. The clearest proof is his superb bust painting of himself, at the age of fifty or thereabouts, which hangs in the Royal Academy's Diploma Gallery. In this painting there is hardly a trace of Italian influence ; its keynote is its intimacy ; and it is utterly free from any pretensions to ' the grand style.' It is far from the Rubens-Van Dyck-Lely tradition, but in its simplicity, honesty, purity of colour, and fine quality of pigment it is akin to the painting of Hogarth, Chardin, and Vermeer of Delft. In a word, it is Dutch, not Italian, in character. It is infinitely superior to the earlier portrait of himself at the National Portrait Gallery, because Wilson, whose genius developed slowly, had matured his powers by the time of the second portrait. The vigour of his drawing and modelling is unimpaired, but he has become a more subtle colourist, knowing how to blend and fuse his tints into one another with that

mystery which Mr. Fletcher denies to his portraits. But the essential difference between the two works is not one of kind, but of degree.\*

Further, it may be admitted that in the second portrait the painter has a better model. Now he has to paint the face of a man of wider experience and riper wisdom, one who has lived, has suffered, and, so far, has endured his lot with patience and cheerfulness. As a revelation of character Wilson's self-portrait is far more eloquent than the inferior but frequently reproduced portrait of him by Raphael Mengs. How any man who has seen this portrait could assert that it conveys no suggestion that the original is 'good company to live with' passes all understanding. Obviously it is the face of a kind and intelligent man, whose honest, upright nature shines out through his thoughtful, far-gazing eyes. This portrait is everything that Mr. Fletcher says Wilson's portraits are not. It has real

---

\* The portrait of Wilson in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, which is almost certainly a self-portrait of later date than the Diploma Gallery picture, seems to hark back still more markedly to the Richardson type [Ed.].

beauty, both of conception and execution, it does appeal to our imagination and sympathy, and it does fulfil its purpose 'in being merely pleasing to the actual eyesight.' The head is not thrown on to the canvas anyhow ; it is most carefully placed to form an attractive design, and is balanced perfectly by the painter's palette in the lower right-hand corner of the picture.

The other great painting by Wilson in the Diploma Gallery, *J. H. Mortimer, A.R.A.*, is a more surprising production, though one would hesitate to pronounce it definitely to be more beautiful. The portrait of himself is what we might expect it to be if we know his landscapes well, but none of the landscapes really prepare us for the *Mortimer* portrait. This is much nearer to 'the grand style.' Mortimer is not merely seen ; he is 'presented' ; and Italian influence may be traced, not only in the general arrangement, but in certain details, like the masonry in the background, which distinctly recalls Guardi.

John Hamilton Mortimer was born in 1741, and since he is clearly quite a young man at the time of this portrait we may

assume that it was painted in 1760, or thereabouts. It is probably six or seven years earlier than Wilson's painting of himself, and is contemporary with Gainsborough's earliest Bath portraits and Reynolds' *Lord Ligonier*. We ought to compare these and other contemporary paintings with the *Mortimer* to learn Wilson's relative position as a portrait painter.

There is ample evidence that Wilson's portrait was seen by, and made a great impression on, his brother artists, and, since it is anterior to the finest open-air portraits by Gainsborough and Reynolds, it is permissible to regard it as an important pioneer work which possibly had some influence in shaping the direction of British eighteenth century portraiture. Lawrence, more generous than his predecessor in the presidential chair, pronounced it to be a 'beautiful and truly interesting work of art,' and John Britton, an early enthusiast for Wilson's work, remarked that in this Wilson 'produced a picture to compete with a Reynolds, a Van Dyck, or a Titian.'\* The comparisons do

---

\* John Britton, *Fine Arts of the English School*, 1842.

not seem very happy to a modern reader, but the intention is good.

The conception of this picture is truly original. In showing us Mortimer full-length standing, with one foot up to rest a sketch-book on his knee, his body turned to the right, but his head turned leftwards to scrutinise the object he is sketching, Wilson gives extraordinary alertness and vivacity to his figure. The plum-coloured dress shows up beautifully against the greenish-greys of the masonry, while the design—in which diagonal accents are provided by the angle of the masonry, Mortimer's left shoulder and right knee, and a kerchief on the ground, and in the contrary direction by the sky-illuminated landscape, and the high lights on Mortimer's stockings—is most subtle and rhythmical. The whole picture is not only sumptuous in colour, but is also splendidly pictorial in its unity of effect. Even Mr. Fletcher, bowing to authority profusely quoted, admits its excellence.

The most remarkable thing about a truly remarkable picture does not, after all, consist in any of the details; it must lie in the effect as a whole; and here, in this portrait of Mortimer, Wilson has shown for once as a portrait painter that he could



*Burlington House*

*Diploma Gallery*

PORTRAIT OF J H MORTIMER, A.R.A.

Richard Wilson



keep an eye to the whole as unerring and instant as he kept invariably in landscape.\*

Here it may be observed that not only is Wilson's self-portrait equally seen as a whole, but the effect of the whole was at one time a salient characteristic of Wilson's early portrait group, *The Two Young Princes with their Tutor*. This effect has now been utterly destroyed, because in 1915, by order of the Trustees of the National Portrait Gallery, this large group was divided, and the figure of Dr. Ayscough—held to be 'an obvious addition'—was detached and framed separately. At the same time the portion showing the two young princes was cleaned, and, whether as the result of this renovation or of an earlier 'restoration,' the head of the Duke of York is now skinned of its top glaze, so that it is out of tone with the rest of the picture. The painting of the tutor in his black robes, though less attractive in colour, bears internal evidence in the modelling and shadows of the head of being the handiwork of Wilson. Doubt, however, has been thrown on its authenticity. Mr. James D. Milner, the present keeper of the National

---

\* Beaumont Fletcher, *op. cit.*

Portrait Gallery, has defended the dislocation of the canvas. 'While there is certainly a unity of design in the whole group,' he writes, 'the figure of the tutor looks so aggressively dominating that I think the reduction has been a great improvement. The doctor's figure is certainly by a coarser and inferior hand, though whether by Wilson at a much later period, when his hand had lost some of its cunning, or by another artist, I cannot be quite certain. There is, however, an evident inferiority to the figures of the two princes, though the whole tone of the picture was very well balanced and maintained.' The Ayscough portion is now so badly hung and is in so inferior a condition to the other portion that a just comparison of the two is no longer easy ; but so far as we may judge from the fragments that remain, the view here put forward is untenable. When, we may enquire, did Wilson's hand lose 'some of its cunning' ? Not even mutilation and renovation have been able to shear Wilson's work of all its beauties, and we can still see how the figures of the two princes are enveloped in light and

air, and still admire the splendid passages of colour and texture painting in the blue velvet coat of the one and the grey satin waistcoat of the other.

All painters—save the worst—are unequal. It is unreasonable to expect any man to produce a masterpiece every day or every year. But since it is the treatment and not the subject that gives enduring interest to a picture, it is a fallacy to suppose that an artist will invariably fail with one subject and succeed with another. When he is a true painter happily inspired, his work will charm and delight us, irrespective of what the subject of the moment may happen to be. We do not think of Vermeer as a portrait painter, or instinctively class him among the most famous portrait painters, yet his *Head of a Young Girl* at The Hague is one of the loveliest portraits in the world. Ninety-nine people out of a hundred think of Corot as a landscape painter, and as a landscape painter only; yet his *Dame en Bleu*, formerly in the Rouart Collection and now in the Louvre, is one of the most beautiful small full-length figures painted since the days of Chardin and Vermeer. The point insisted on is that

Richard Wilson was a *painter*, and not merely a landscape painter.

Stress has been laid on Wilson's portraits, hitherto strangely neglected, because the present writer firmly believes that at least two of them occupy as important a place in the whole work of Wilson as the paintings mentioned above do in the work of Vermeer and Corot. Of the undisputed portraits by Wilson that he has been able to study, none seems to the writer to be altogether lacking in interest, but the two at Burlington House are positively beautiful. Contrary to much received opinion and to the verdict of the eighteenth century, the writer is inclined to rank them as paintings above the *Villa of Mæcenæ*, *Meleager*, and *Destruction of Niobe's Children*. These pictures, pronounced by so many writers to be the supreme achievements of Wilson, doubtless appeared otherwise to his contemporaries than as we see them to-day. At one time there may have been beautiful colour in the mass of foliage on our left as we look at *The Villa of Mæcenæ* in the National Gallery, but to-day it is all dark, and the opposite corner is similarly plunged into now meaningless

obscurity. One fears that in pictures of this description, pictures done for exhibition and to please the purse of rich noblemen, Wilson was not absolutely true to his own ideals. The darkness that has descended on them suggests that in painting them Wilson did not keep his colour as pure as was his wont ; in attempting ' the grand style,' with some concomitant trickery of painting, he seems to have got his pigment into a mess—as Reynolds so often did—and time and chemical action have done the rest. It is not from the wrecks of his ' pot-boilers ' that we should measure the genius of Richard Wilson.

Turn from the pronouncedly ' Italian ' *Villa of Mæcenæ* to the *Italian Coast Scene* (No. 2646) and we may see the painter at his best—the best, at all events, which the National Gallery has to show. How nobly this work has withstood the test of time ! Its purity and loveliness of colour are undimmed ; a pinkish tinge still flushes luminous clouds in the great golden-blue sky, its hue harmonising exquisitely with the sea-greens of the water. Its design—based on a recumbent <—is simple but charming in effect, and the whole painting is of a rare,

fine quality ; but once he has recovered from the spell cast by its sheer beauty, what leaps at once to the notice of the intelligent beholder is that this painting is Italian in subject only ; in treatment and handling it is as Dutch as a Van Goyen. The scene beheld is certainly beautified and dignified by the treatment, but essentially it is as 'natural' a landscape as ever Constable painted.

Just as, in portraiture, Wilson's leaning first and last was towards the simplicity, honesty, and thorough technique of the Dutch, as opposed to the pretentiousness and technical trickery of the later Italians, so it was in landscape. In spite of all temptations to maltreat pigment in dramatic designs after the manner of Salvator Rosa, Wilson at every possible opportunity disappointed the expectations of the wealthy patrons of the day, and produced true and simple impressions of natural beauty. The *Twickenham* and *Oxford* landscapes in the Ford Collection show sufficiently where his heart was at the last ; but where was it at the beginning in landscape ?

Three years before he went to Italy Richard

Wilson plainly declared his ideals as a landscape painter. It is the most amusing thing in the world that all the time it has been debated whether or no Wilson ever painted landscapes before he went to Italy in 1749—while it has been gravely discussed whether he painted the engraved *View of Dover* while he was waiting for the sea to calm or the boat to arrive—all this time evidence that he *did* paint landscapes long before he met Zuccarelli has, so to speak, been staring us in the face.

At the Foundling Hospital in Guildford Street there are two delightful little paintings by Richard Wilson, views of *St. George's Hospital* and *Foundling Hospital*, which he contributed as a free gift towards the decoration of the interior. It is on record at the Foundling Hospital that at the Quarterly Court held at Christmas, 1746, Richard Wilson, with other artists, was thanked for the works he had presented to the hospital. The date of these paintings, therefore, cannot be questioned. Had Wilson at this time been a portrait painter, and nothing but a portrait painter, he would no doubt have presented the Foundling Hospital with a

portrait, as Hogarth did. But since he not only presented two views, but two views painted for a *special* position—as those of the marine painter, Samuel Scott (1710–1772), also were—it is reasonable to conclude that these pictures were not a new departure, but examples of a branch of painting which hitherto he had practised for pleasure rather than profit.

These little circular landscapes of buildings surrounded by fields are, therefore, just about contemporary with the self-portrait given by Sir Hugh Lane to the National Portrait Gallery, and they are, moreover, very much what we might expect at the time from the painter of the portrait. They are finer in quality of paint, partly because their smaller dimensions encouraged a more intimate touch, but in them, as in the best of the later work, we find that the fundamental method is not the 'sweeping brush-stroke' and a 'clever' juggling with pigment, but the clean, precise, intimate touch of the Dutch masters ; and also, incidentally, of the earlier Italian painters before the decadence of the sixteenth century. The Foundling panels have the same enamel-like surface and the

same delicacy of colour that we find in the *Italian Coast Scene*.

The contention, then, is that Richard Wilson did not suddenly alter his style or practice of painting at any time ; he merely swung over his main attention from portraiture to landscape ; and the probability is that he had made up his mind to do this before he left England for Italy. It is also probable that one of the reasons which prompted him to do so, apart from his obviously deep and sincere love of nature, was that his independent and exceedingly frank nature revolted from the sycophancy and social humbug which a portrait painter at that period was almost obliged to cultivate and parade.

For the rest, it is suggested that while adhering to the general principles of his early practice, Wilson gradually matured his powers, gaining increasing mastery in the rendering of light and air, perfecting his science of design, his manipulation of pigment, and his harmony of colour, till towards the end he could permit himself the complete freedom of a master, and, with complete success, vigorously load a panel with the

fat, juicy paint that we see in the wonderful sky of the *Rocky River Scene* (No. 1071) of the Tate Gallery. This picture is the historical prelude to Crome and Constable.

One brief record of his practice in landscape painting is preserved for us in Wilson's own handwriting in Farington's sketch-book of 1763, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

The distance is first painted in Body and if dead coloured next the Better and more readily finished, you may then oil it out, white drying oil the best for that purpose.

Unfortunately careful search has failed as yet to reveal any other written instruction given by Wilson to his pupil. Wright, however, gives the following particulars of Wilson's process, 'derived from a very authentic source,' namely, from Sir William Pilkington, Bart., to whom they were communicated 'by a gentleman who received them from the late Mr. Farington':

Wilson dead-coloured in a very broad, simple manner, giving a faint idea of the effect and colour intended, but without any very bright light or strong dark; quite flat, and no handling whatever; the shadows on the foreground thin and clear; air tint prevailing.

When perfectly dry, he went over it a second

time, heightening every part with colour, and deepening the shadows, but still brown, free, loose, and flat, and left in a state for finishing ; the half tints laid in, without high lights. The third time, he altered what was necessary in the masses of tint, adding all the necessary sharpness and handling to the different objects, and then gave the finish to his picture.

His great care was to bring up all the parts of his picture together, and not to finish one part before another, so that his picture should not, as the painters term it, run away with him, and that while working in one part he should introduce that colour into other parts where it suited, or to lower the tone fit to make it suit, that the different parts might keep company with each other.

His air tint was blue, burnt ochre, and light red, sometimes a little vermilion, and, in other cases, he made his air tint of the lakes and blue ; with the lakes he made his glazing tints on the foreground very rich and warm, and of their full force ; but all this was moderated by the tints which he laid on the glazings. If any part was hard, he restored it by scumbling the air tint, suited to the distance of the part, over it, and then added the finishing touches and sharpness, to prevent its being smoky or mealy. A *magylph*, or majellup, of linseed oil and mastic varnish, in which the latter predominated, was his usual vehicle, and an oyster-shell served him to contain it. He dead-coloured with Prussian blue, but always finished the sky and distance with ultramarine ; for it was his opinion that no other blue could give the beautiful effect of air.

On the same authority Wright gives the following as Wilson's palette : white, Naples yellow, vermilion, light ochre, brown ochre, dark or Roman ochre, lake, yellow lake, lamp

black, Prussian blue, ultramarine, burnt terra di Sienna. Asked to comment on this alleged palette, a distinguished living artist, who knows Wilson's work well, kindly favoured the writer with the following :

Wright's version of Wilson's palette is an odd one certainly. I have seen it similarly quoted, but I have learnt not to be easily surprised by anybody's palette. Light red (or Venetian red) might safely be added to it. As for the Prussian blue, I know Wilson is credited with it, but don't know on what authority. I would not dispute it, because nothing is harder than to be dead certain about particular pigments in a picture. But I see no evidence for it, and no reason for it at all. It might have been used in occasional greens, and might have been used for the underpainting of the sky, though I can see no advantage it would have in the latter case over ultramarine except cost. I take it the modern substitutes for ultramarine, like most blues we are familiar with now, would not have been available to Wilson. He certainly finished his skies with ultramarine, and is credited somewhere with saying that no other blue would do it.

I see nothing against the lamp black except its strength, and if he didn't mind working with Prussian blue he would have nothing to fear from lamp black. Vermilion he certainly used in isolated figures. I should not expect it elsewhere. Vermilion is an unhandy colour except when used by an old Dutchman.

I will not speak of the greens in the Oxford picture from memory, but I have no doubt his usual practice was to paint them with a cold underpainting resembling terre-verte and white.

The pictures certainly suggest terre-verte, and there is every reason why he should use it. This underpaint was pitched very high, so that he could glaze it with a warm, rich glaze, probably reddish. The impasto is generally reserved almost till the end, the picture proceeding by alternate scumbles and glazings, heightening here and enriching there until it approaches completion.

Contrary to the common supposition, I believe he used scarcely less medium in the lights than in the darks. In superimposing gold over blue, as he constantly did, the more transparent the pigment the more luminous the effect. Thus if you paint with either wax, meglp, Venice turpentine, or similar media, you can put on stiff paint containing white, which is rendered translucent by the amount of the vehicle. I mean that with any of these vehicles you can put on a solid touch of the vehicle alone, or you can modify it with as much or as little opaque pigment as you choose. The point is the gain in transparency. This transparency of the superimposed colour more than anything else contributes, I believe, to the luminous skies of such painters as Cuyp, Claude, Wilson, and Crome.

It is encouraging to find a professional painter who knows his work well thus associating Richard Wilson as naturally with a Dutch painter like Cuyp as with Claude, for it shows that, notwithstanding the preponderating number of his Italian subjects, the notion that Wilson was ever an Italianised artist is merely a popular superstition. Too much stress must not be

laid on nationality in these matters. 'Dutch' is only a short and convenient way of denoting a certain style of painting which has been practised by artists of all nations. There are, after all, only two general ways of handling pigment—one is to spread it about, like butter, with a hand that may be lavish or stingy; the other is to place it reverently *just so* in its allotted place, as if each touch of colour were a jewel. All the known styles are variants of the one or the other. Wilson, needless to remark, was an exponent of the process by the touch.

The style of Richard Wilson was the man's nature, and this was far too big to attempt to fit all the scenery of England and Italy into one preconceived pattern. The characteristics of his art are not, as some have supposed, a luminous sky, a tree in one corner, and a classical ruin in another, but an unswerving respect for his material, a poetic eye for the rhythm in nature, and a passionate emotion for the appeal of light and colour.

The perfect and essential type of his Italian landscape is his *View in Italy* in the Ford Collection (No. 18 in the Brighton

Exhibition catalogue). The scene is simplicity itself—a castle on a high, rocky hill to the right, under which three figures are lying in the foreground ; to the left a lake, in which is reflected a domed ruin in the middle distance ; and beyond this a range of distant hills and the sky. This gold evening sky is luminous to a miracle, and the whole picture is steeped in emotion. A lover of fine painting has conjectured that this ' was done before he knew exactly how to do it, and you can fairly feel him throbbing with excitement as the thing came right.' In a word, it is not a work of science, but a work of art, of feeling. The magic of it is something that cannot be repeated. There is a very poor version of the same subject in the Tate Gallery ; perhaps it has been cleaned to death, perhaps it was never finished, but one feels that Wilson's reputation has suffered because among so many of his Italian subjects there is one, the original version, painted with real inspiration, and other versions of the same subject painted when Wilson knew, or thought he knew, ' exactly how to do it.' Something like the same difference

exists between the glowing *Landscape with Bathers* in the Leeds Art Gallery and the smaller and poorer version of the same subject (No. 1290) in the National Gallery.

Depending, as he did, on the inspiration of the moment and the feeling conjured up by the effect before his eyes, Wilson was at his worst in painting an imaginary subject to order. The 'knowledge of a lifetime' could take him a long way, but it took him furthest when it was combined with the enchantment of the hour. Wilson was pre-eminently a painter who saw, felt, and expressed beautifully what he had seen and felt. His art was anchored to nature, and he could make no real progress with visionary hallucinations. His water-colour *Study for Destruction of Niobe's Children* (P. 15-1915), which at the moment of writing hangs in Room 82 of the Victoria and Albert Museum, is to modern eyes much to be preferred to the oil-painting of this subject in the Tate Gallery, for in the *Study* we get the stormy landscape undefiled, and it was the landscape, the mood of nature depicted, not the tragedy of Niobe, which interested Wilson, and consequently interests us.

If Wilson had wanted to rouse our sympathy with the sad catastrophe which befell Niobe and succeeded no better than this, we might reproach him with having signally failed to accomplish his purpose. But if Wilson wanted to paint a mood of nature, and a fool came and said, 'I won't give you a penny for your picture unless you put Niobe and at least half a dozen of her children into the landscape,' then you may blame the fool, but you must congratulate Wilson on having made the best of a bad job. A painter stands or falls by the degree of success with which he carries out his own intentions, and what he does with other people's intentions does not matter one brass farthing.

If Sir Joshua Reynolds had paid more attention to the painting and less to the desires of the aristocracy, his criticism of Wilson's *Niobe* might be more profitable reading. What would really have been illuminating would have been to have heard Richard Wilson's unmitigated criticism of Reynolds' attempt at landscape—his *Entrance to Mr. Thrall's Park at Streatham* (D.18) in the Dyce Collection at the Victoria

and Albert Museum. 'Where is your airtint, Sir Joshua?' Wilson might have asked. 'Why are the trees woolly, and why does the land rise up when it ought to lie down?' If ever an enlightened Government organises an Exhibition of Bad Paintings by Famous Artists this landscape by Reynolds deserves a prominent place.

Turning from this example of Sir Joshua's practice in landscape painting to the sonorous periods of his theory, we are bewildered by the irrelevancy and irrationalism of his censure :

Our late ingenious Academician, Wilson, has, I fear, been guilty, like many of his predecessors, of introducing gods and goddesses, ideal beings, into scenes which were by no means prepared to receive such personages. His landscapes were in reality too near common nature to admit supernatural objects. In consequence of this mistake, in a very admirable picture of a storm, which I have seen of his hand, many figures are introduced in the foreground, some in apparent distress and some struck dead, as a spectator would naturally suppose, by the lightning, had not the painter injudiciously (as I think) rather chosen that their death should be imputed to a little Apollo, who appears in the sky with his bent bow, and that those figures should be considered as the children of Niobe.

To manage a subject of this kind a peculiar style of art is required, and it can only be done without impropriety, or even without ridicule, when we adapt the character of the landscape, and that, too, in all its parts, to the historical or poetical representation.

This is a very difficult adventure, and it requires a mind thrown back two thousand years, and, as it were, naturalised in antiquity, like that of Nicolo Poussin, to achieve it.

Surely in providing a dramatic landscape for a dramatic episode Wilson was 'adapting' the character of the landscape to fit the subject as closely as anybody could demand. And what sort of landscape will make 'supernatural objects' appear natural? Had Sir Joshua confined his remarks to regretting the insertion of 'a little Apollo' we should all bow to his wisdom, but when he begins to praise a mind 'naturalised in antiquity' we feel that he is talking nonsense. On this head Mr. Beaumont Fletcher makes the very sensible observation: 'Cloud, rock, or river would have been to an observer in antiquity only what each is to an observer nowadays—cloud, rock, or river.'\* And there we may leave it.

---

\* I do not agree. For the purposes of his art, the Greek anthropomorphised everything—cloud, rock, and river—or else he left them out. That is what a mind really 'naturalised in antiquity' would have done; so that neither Poussin, nor any other landscape painter, could ever have 'a mind naturalised in antiquity,' for if he had, he would not paint landscape [Ed.].

Whatever his relations with Sir Joshua may have been, Richard Wilson comes out best on every occasion. He may not greatly have admired Reynolds' work—it would be surprising if he did—and he was not the man to humour his junior just because he was a success and had been knighted. It was the duty of Reynolds, rather, to be respectful to a man who was ten years his senior, and at the least his equal in his profession. Did Reynolds know in his heart that Wilson was the better painter of the two, and was he for this reason jealous? It is tragic to think that prosperity should grudge penury its crumb of comfort, yet the well-weighed words of Hoppner are ominous :

Firmly as Sir Joshua appeared seated in the opinion of the public, his jealousy quickly took the alarm; and of two evils he chose rather to suffer in his own good opinion, than bear a brother near the throne. Of this feeling he has left sufficient evidence in his critique on the works of Wilson and Gainsborough, and particularly the latter, whose power of giving a just resemblance he formally denies.

---

*Note:* As this book is going to press Mr. Carey Morris writes to inform me that he has had the *Woffington* portrait at the Garrick Club out of its frame, and has discovered on it the signature of Richard Wilson and the date 1758.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE QUALITY OF THE ARTIST.

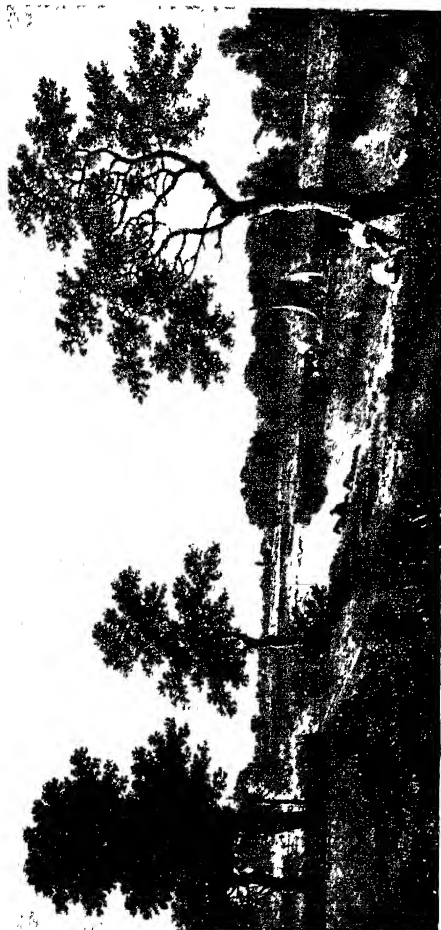
IT is a miserable, but unfortunately it is a true reflection, that the estimation in which an artist is held by any one generation does not depend entirely on his excellence, but on a variety of circumstances—the accessibility or otherwise of his principal pictures, the extent to which they are known by reproductions, the number of books and articles written about him, the fashion of the day, and the direction in which the market in his remaining works is controlled and manipulated by powerful dealers.

If Richard Wilson's full-length portrait of *John Hamilton Mortimer, A.R.A.*, had been hanging for thirty years in a good position in the National Gallery, instead of being tucked away in an obscure corner of the Diploma Gallery at Burlington House, he would probably be more frequently mentioned among the portrait painters of the eighteenth century.

If the unrivalled collection of his finest landscapes, instead of being in the possession of Captain Richard Ford, had got into the hands of one of the magnates of Bond Street, we should surely have seen one of them sold at Christie's for a sum of five figures, and a subsequent Richard Wilson Exhibition, in which that artist would have been extensively paragraphed as one of the chief glories of British painting. But, with no particular axes to grind, the general appreciation of his painting hitherto has been lamentably inadequate, though distinguished painters and some few writers on art have known the value of his work, and have rightly estimated Wilson's enduring influence on English painting.

Of recent writers the most discerning criticism of Wilson has come from the pen of Sir Walter Armstrong :

Sir Joshua's neglect of Wilson has been imitated by the English people ever since, and yet he is one of the really great and original masters of the eighteenth century. His best works unite the dignity of Claude and the atmospheric truth of Cuyp or De Hoogh, with the fat, rich brushing preached by Reynolds himself. At his worst he was the equal of many men admitted to collections the doors of which would never be opened to a Wilson, while at his best he produced things to



*In the possession of*

## THE THAMES AT TWICKENHAM

Richard Wilson

*Capt R. Ford*



which, in their way, no other landscape painter can show a parallel.

This writer\* also was the first to direct attention to the fact that Gainsborough had felt the power of Wilson's work, and for a time had endeavoured to emulate his landscapes.

Ruskin also, though temperamentally debarred from perceiving the full worth of the painter, paid his tribute when he wrote :

I believe that with the name of Richard Wilson the history of sincere landscape art, founded on a meditative love of Nature, begins for England.

Yet since Ruskin's day there have been writers—who shall not be shamed by mention—so abysmally ignorant of Wilson's art, and so hazy about his chronology, that they have gravely debated whether the title 'The father of British landscape' does not more rightfully belong to Gainsborough than to Wilson. It is hardly necessary to remind the reader that when Richard Wilson was painting his Italian landscapes Gainsborough was a young man of twenty-two, practising portrait painting in Ipswich prior to his removal to Bath.

---

\* Cf. *Gainsborough*, by Sir William Armstrong.

It is the fashion of the day to decry the comparison of artists, but the Belgian painter, Alfred Stevens, once said, 'To compare is to know.' He was right, for it is by comparison—and by comparison only—that we can establish the rank of a painter in the hierarchy of art.

Let us proceed, then, to compare the work of Richard Wilson with that of as many other painters as convenient. Wilson will not suffer thereby, for comparisons are only odious to the inferior.

Such comparisons as have hitherto been instituted between the landscapes of Wilson and Gainsborough have laid stress principally on the theory that the younger artist based his practice on the study of Dutch landscape, while Wilson paid more attention to the work of the Italians and Franco-Romans. Without pausing to insist that reminiscences of Cuyp, Berchem, De Hoogh, and still more so of Rembrandt, can be detected in Wilson's work as well as in Gainsborough's, it may be admitted that this discrimination is just, but chiefly as regards the design of the two artists. When we come to consider their paint the position is different. Here

we embark on what some hold to be the unprofitable pastime of comparing things unlike. Gainsborough belongs to the order of artists whose painted surface approximates to the texture of silk, Richard Wilson to those whose work bears an analogy to velvet. To argue whether silk is better than velvet, or whether velvet is better than silk, is manifestly unprofitable; but it is not altogether idle to point out that velvet has qualities which silk does not possess. It may be a trifle duller, but it is softer, deeper, is gentler in its richness, and has the indefinable quality of a bestowed caress. These are qualities we perceive only in a few of the world's great paintings. We get them in the finest Vermeers, in the early Italian Corots and in some of his figure-pieces, and sometimes we get them in a Wilson. There never was a Gainsborough we could possibly connect with Vermeer's *View of Delft*, but—to take the handiest example—it is by no means preposterous to connect it with Wilson's *Italian Coast Scene* (No. 2646) in the National Gallery. This connection exists, of course, not in the subject or design, but partly in the colour,

and still more in that inherent beauty of the pigment which, for want of a better term, we vaguely allude to as 'quality.'

To maintain that Richard Wilson was a greater artist than Gainsborough might well be hazardous—both, in their own way, were great men—but it is not impossible to demonstrate that Wilson's landscapes are nearer perfection than those of Gainsborough. This was demonstrated more than a hundred years ago by John Hoppner, who remarked that Wilson's

very first attempts, in this walk of art, were distinguished by an unusual elevation of style and character. The glowing and rich scenery of Italy, with its numerous classical remains, warmed into action the latent feelings of a cultivated and elegant mind, and he viewed nature at once with the enthusiastic eye of a poet. We recollect no painter who, with so much originality of manner, united such truth and grandeur of expression; and although, in the opinion of Mr. Edwards, his pictures were incomplete, we feel assured that, while he was in possession of his full powers, negligence was in no degree the cause of this imaginary defect, but that every touch of his pencil was directed by a principle that required the subserviency of particular parts to the full establishment of the whole. In Wilson's landscapes even the figures are rendered accessory to the general effect; while in the works of other masters, men and women are introduced apparently to keep the scene alive, though in other respects they seem to be, as sometimes in nature, rather ornamental than useful.

The early works of Gainsborough, on the contrary, are rendered touching by the simplicity of their execution and choice of scenery. His uplands are the abode of ruddy health and labour; the by-paths, the deep entrenched roads, the team, and the clownish waggoner, all lead us to the pleasing contemplation of rustic scenery, and domesticate us with the objects which he so faithfully delineated. This sensibility to sylvan scenery, however, became weaker as he grew more intimate with the works of the Flemish and Dutch masters, whose choice of nature he appears to have thought better than that which he had been accustomed to study; and he may be traced through those schools, from the mere imitations of weeds and moss, up to the full enjoyment of Rubens. The admirers of cultivated art will find him most varied and beautiful at this period, as his works, strengthened and enriched by the study of Rubens, still possessed a uniformity of character which, if not so simple as his first representations of nature, is not polluted by the extravagance of a style making pretensions to a higher character. His last manner, though greatly inferior to that immediately preceding it, was certainly the result of much practice and knowledge, with some leaning perhaps to the suggestions of indolence. Its principal defect seemed to be that it neither presented the spectator with a faithful delineation of nature, nor possessed any just pretensions to be classed with the epic works of art; for the first, it was, both in its forms and effects, too general; and for the last, not sufficiently ideal or elevated.\*

Considering that he was a warm partisan of the Reynolds faction, it is as surprising as it is pleasant to find Hoppner so generous

---

\* *Hoppner's Essays on Art*, 1908, pp. 75-77.

and so discriminating an admirer of Richard Wilson, whose art Sir Joshua could not or would not understand. Of all the stupid things written about Wilson, nothing equals the egregious folly of Reynolds' phrase : ' Our late *ingenious* Academician.' Ingenious was the one thing Wilson never was, and to apply this epithet to his art is monstrously inappropriate. There is no 'cleverness' in Wilson any more than there is in Vermeer. What charms us in his work is not his skill, but his honesty, his simplicity, his deep feeling. Beyond all things it is as an emotional, not as an intellectual, painter that Wilson takes high rank. Herein lies probably one of the reasons for his comparative neglect, since shallow minds are always prone to associate the 'clever' with the great. Yet the 'best brains' frequently belong to mediocrities ; what distinguishes the men of genius is their great heart.

When, nearly twenty-five years after his death, his pupil, Joseph Farington, gravely sets down that in comparison with Claude ' the largeness and dignity of Wilson's mind is most striking,' it sounds at first like the extravagant praise of an enthusiast. But

it is good criticism if for 'mind' we read 'heart,' which is what Farington meant. Wilson did have a larger heart than Claude. Claude's worship was all given to the wonders of sunlight, to

the mighty dome of heaven, which gleams in the morning in a cool, silver splendour, at noon like liquid gold, and at even like crimson.\*

Hence the limitations of his pictures, which are all variations of a single theme. The elements of his design occur and recur in his pictures with hardly a change of position, and the one thing that alters and makes each picture different is the light.

Wilson also was a worshipper of light, and his skies are among the most beautiful that exist in paint, but his heart was not given in its entirety to the dome of heaven. His gaze could dwell on earth, rejoicing alike in the marvels of nature and in the monuments of man. The majesty of Rome and its ancient buildings could move him to a sublimity of feeling that inspires us almost with awe, yet the homely beauties of the lower Thames could also touch him so deeply that he is

---

\* Richard Muther, *History of Painting*, 1907, p. 510.

still able to thrill us by the poignancy of his feeling. In the Print Room of the British Museum there is an exquisitely sensitive *Still Life Study* (No. 57 L.B.), in black chalk on grey paper, which tells us that Wilson, like Chardin, could be really stirred by the contemplation of simple objects, such as a loaf, a knife, and an iron pot. Wilson's despairing repetition of certain Italian landscapes, which had once proved saleable and might, he hoped, again mend his broken fortunes, have blinded many to the infinite variety of his work and to the divers aspects of nature, which he rendered with dignity and joy. Even the late Sir Frederick Wedmore, in acknowledging that Wilson was not idealist 'to the point of the exclusion of truth,' in admitting that his pictures enable us 'to realise the air and the illumination of the hour,' concludes with the extraordinary remark that 'For Wilson, England was almost non-existent, and even his own Wales was not much more than an episode.' \* What an epitaph to write on the painter of *The Thames at Twickenham*, the *View of Oxford*, the *Hounslow Heath* and the *Sion Park and*

---

\* Sir Frederick Wedmore, *Painters and Painting*.

*House*, in the Ford Collection ; of the *Welsh Valley* and *Pembroke Castle*, in the Manchester Art Gallery ; of the *Scene on an English River* in the Glasgow Art Gallery ; of the noble *Windsor Castle* in the possession of Mr. Oscar Blount of Windsor, of the *Rocky River Scene* (No. 1071) and *On the Wye* in the possession of the National Gallery !

In some ways the most discerning of his contemporaries were more just to Richard Wilson than many later writers have been, for though, owing to the exaggerated respect paid to things classical in the eighteenth century, the general tendency was to ignore Wilson's English landscapes and to bestow the highest praise on pictures like his *Niobe* which modern criticism would place in a distinctly lower category, yet here and there we find a generous appreciation of his genuine originality and versatility. Dr. Wolcot, for example, the ' Peter Pindar ' whose rhymed appreciation of Wilson is constantly quoted in anecdotal books about artists, gave a far weightier pronouncement in prose, which is comparatively little known :

Wilson has been called the English Claude ; but how unjustly, so totally different their style.

Claude sometimes painted grand scenes, but without a mind of grandeur; Wilson, on the contrary, could infuse a grandeur into the meanest objects. Claude, when he drew on the bank of his own ideas, was a mere *castrato* in the art; witness his *Landing of Aeneas in Italy*. Wilson, on the contrary, was a Hercules. . . . His subjects were the selections of taste, and whether of the simple, the elegant, or the sublime, they were treated with equal felicity. Indeed, he possessed that versatility of power as to be one minute an eagle, sweeping the heavens, and the next a wren, twittering a simple note on the humble thorn.

Wilson's dependence on Claude is a matter that has been grossly overestimated. He was influenced by him in two directions, but in two only. No doubt he learnt much from Claude's aerial perspective, that is to say, from his suggestion of distance by a perspective not only of lines, but of relative degrees of illumination. By a subtle gradation of tones (or 'values') in foreground, middle distance, and background, the Frenchman gave his paintings an immense sense of space, and filled them with light and air. But the study of Claude only accentuated a more perfect rendering of light and air towards which Wilson had already been moving before he left England. Once upon a time this was obvious to every beholder of Wilson's early portrait group, *The Two Young*

*Princes with their Tutor*, in the National Portrait Gallery. Now that this group has been divided into two pictures, one of Dr. Ayscough, and the other of the Prince of Wales and Duke of York, it is no longer possible to perceive the exquisitely just relations between the round table by which the tutor is standing, the sofa on which the princes are seated, and the pillars in the background, which proved that even at this early stage in his career Richard Wilson was keenly sensitive to light and atmosphere, and able to express them with mastery.

The other direction in which Wilson was influenced by Claude was design. He made frequent—perhaps too frequent—use of Claude's skeleton framework for picture building—the favourite strong diagonal or criss-cross of diagonals, emphasised usually by a tree in one corner of the picture and sometimes by a ruin in the other, and the use of this recipe produced a superficial resemblance between Claude's and Wilson's Italian landscapes. But Wilson, in reality, was far less tied than Claude to this particular pattern. It was the fashion of the day, and as a beginner in landscape he to this extent

gave the public what it wanted. This pattern was the most approved, and in later years, as his sales became more and more infrequent, Wilson reduplicated the popular pattern, so that a vast number of landscapes by him in this style are now existent. But these do not truly show the real bent of his genius, and if we analyse them we shall find that, almost without exception, they are mere repetitions or slight variants of about a dozen 'standard' Italian landscapes which he had originally painted many years earlier. This despairing, pot-boiling multiplication of one type of landscape has contributed to the neglect of Wilson's real powers, for the volume of them has caused this type to be generally associated with Wilson's name, and has obscured the intrinsically still more important English landscapes.

The supreme masterpiece among his Italian scenes is the great *Tiber: Rome in the Distance* in the Ford Collection. This, as Hastings pointed out in 1825,

is painted with unusual strength of colouring. The blaze produced by the effect of the setting sun is most sublimely felt, and the rich, deep tones are executed with the force of Rembrandt

In this there is not a word of exaggeration. The picture is a milestone in British painting, and must have been an incentive and an example to J. M. W. Turner.

But, magnificent and luminous as this work undoubtedly is with its glorious sunset hues, it is not so completely new and unprecedented a thing in landscape painting as *The Thames at Twickenham* or the *View near Oxford*.

Wilson's own leaning towards a more 'natural' style of landscape than the example of Claude and Poussin provided, was revealed long before he left Italy. In the Print Room of the British Museum there is a beautiful drawing, *View in the Campagna*, which is as unlike a Claude as anything could be. This slight, delicate drawing shows the main lines only of a horizontal composition: the main accents are provided by a fringe of low hills on the horizon, an unusually long bridge crossing a river which sweeps round to our right, and a group of cattle in the wide, flat fields of the foreground. It is like a Cuyp subject, only it is more emphatic in design, because it was the peculiar distinction of Richard Wilson to be able to wed

perfect simplicity with a noble sense of arrangement.

Another beautiful Italian drawing in the British Museum is *Rome from Ponte Mola*, which appears to be one of several careful studies which Wilson made preparatory to his *Tiber* painting. These drawings demonstrate that Wilson painted Italy as truly as he painted England and Wales. The Italian landscapes are as true to the nature of Italy as are the English to the nature of England.

After Wilson had left Rome and again settled in London we may conjecture that he painted Italian landscapes to please his patrons and English landscapes to please himself. Apart from Wolcot—whose ‘wren twittering a simple note on the humble thorn’ is an eloquent and inspiring comment on the *Twickenham* and *Oxford* pictures—no contemporary writer appears to have had any enthusiasm for Wilson’s English landscapes, though the outstanding worth of them was evidently recognised by many artists: Farington, Wright of Derby, Constable, Girtin, and, through Beechey, Crome—a young Crome of fourteen when Wilson



*British Museum.*

STUDY FOR "THE TIBER."

Richard Wilson



died. To realise the extent to which Richard Wilson prepared the way for both Constable and Crome we have only to look at his *Rocky River Scene* (No. 1071) in the Tate Gallery, and note alike the freedom of its handling throughout and the fat, juicy pigment particularly observable in the sky.

‘Poor Wilson!’ said Constable. ‘Think of his fate; think of his magnificence!’ That is the right and only possible way to think of him, so that the tragedy of the Man is not allowed to obscure the glory of the Painter. That glory, it may be observed, is not limited to his own country, for, while Wilson profoundly influenced the course of landscape painting in England, he is also one of the very few British artists who have obtained a secure position in European art. There his position is far more secure than that of the consequential junior, Sir Joshua Reynolds, who presumed to patronise him; for, however much we may revere our eighteenth century portrait painters at home, it must be admitted that abroad they have made far less stir than our landscape painters.

It is remarkable that French and German critics, who do not know his work so well as

they ought to do, invariably assign an honourable place to Richard Wilson in the history of European painting; and if they are apt to regard him mainly as a follower of Claude, and do not always realise that he preceded Gainsborough in inventing the English landscape, the fault lies less with them than with Wilson's own countrymen.

As for his own countrymen—those who know—here is what one of them thinks of Wilson. It was not written for publication, but is an extract from a private letter, and it is illuminating as the considered and confidential opinion of a distinguished modern painter:

I suppose you will agree that the two most potent native influences on English landscape have been Wilson and Constable. They form an illuminating comparison. You may not share my view, but I hold that Wilson was immeasurably the finer artist, and that his influence was wholly good, whereas the influence of Constable has produced an enormous flood of incoherent, sloppy, half-done work. If Wilson had never influenced anybody but Crome (and of course he influenced him enormously) he would have done more good than all Constable's influence put together.

It is curious that in the art of water-colour, or etching, or other obviously limited media, the appropriateness of medium to subject is generally well recognised. People try to do in water-colour what can suitably be done in a wash drawing; they

etch what lends itself to expression by the etched line. In oils it is quite different. Oils are regarded (especially since Constable) as a kind of hold-all into which anything can be jammed. And they jam anything in.

Now in his subtle appreciation of the suitability of his subject to the material of oil-paint Wilson has never been surpassed. His taste in such matters is exquisite, equalling Claude's; whereas in Constable I have never seen any reason to believe that he was aware of the existence of such a discrimination. 'They tell me I have no handling,' says Constable, 'but I see no handling in Nature.' I make no comment on this remarkable observation except to say that Wilson at all events had a fine grasp of the truth that 'there is one beauty of Nature and another beauty of Art.'

It would be difficult, we think, to put the case for Wilson better from the point of view of the practising painter. The painter always looks closely to craftsmanship, which the layman is apt to overlook, and Wilson was a consummate craftsman. But he was not only a craftsman; he is not only a 'painter for painters,' but an artist whose appeal is as wide as it is immediate; a poet in whose creative work beauty and truth are fused in complete unity.

Richard Wilson is one of the great figures of British art, and in his own style—a pure, ennobled, and 'naturalised' classicism—he has never yet been surpassed. His

landscapes may be less exciting than those of Turner, less 'natural'—in the sense of being less of a 'snapshot' of nature—than those of Constable, but they have a serenity and repose not to be found in the work of either of these two masters. Further, for all Constable's fidelity to nature, there is a greater and truer simplicity in Wilson's pictures. It is not asserted that he was greater than these two, but that he was different, and had his own greatness. He was different in the very temper of his art because, whereas Constable and Turner were both Titans, were always more or less in revolt, Richard Wilson was an Olympian, and his painting possesses the serene simplicity that is born of acceptance.

There was never anything in the least degree eccentric or sensational about his painting, yet, while adhering to the highest traditions he knew, his personality was strong enough to give a touch of individual distinction to all he did, so that one can recognise a Wilson from a score of imitators. He is to be recognised, not only by the peculiar stateliness of his design, but also by the distinctive charm of his colour, and

though his large paintings are, as a rule, so triumphantly impressive that it would be untrue to say of him, as one can say of Constable, that his sketches represent the finest flower of his painting, yet in his sketches, of which so fine a variety may be seen in the Ford Collection, we often get intimate glimpses into secrets of colour which charm us vaguely in the larger works. Looking over an array of his sketches, we can hardly escape noticing Wilson's predilection for the cooler hues—his sparing use of reds and yellows, his affection for greens and blues. The blues of Wilson have an irresistible fascination, and their tranquil depth is only equalled by the blues in a Vermeer, or in an early Corot. The relation between Corot and Wilson is discernible in the *Italian Coast Scene* in the National Gallery, and it is still more marked in a small *Italian Lake Scene*, in the possession of Mr. J. C. Squire, the middle distance of which most beautifully anticipates Corot's colour and handling. It is in a half-way house between Vermeer and Corot that fame should ultimately establish Wilson, and if auction-

room prices were governed by artistic worth and merit instead of by fashion, intrigue, and caprice, there should not be so great a difference between the market value of a Corot and of a Richard Wilson.

He is a figure also in European art, and if we cannot at present trace his influence as clearly as we can that of Constable and Turner on French painting, nevertheless it is conceivable that the resemblance between certain Wilsons and certain early Corots is not merely accidental, but that the example of Richard Wilson may yet be proved to have been one of the formative influences on the style of the young Corot.

So much remains to be done in the way of discovering and identifying his portraits and earlier work, of segregating his own authentic paintings from those of his numerous imitators, of tracing his footsteps in Italy, the paintings he must have left there and their influence on painters who visited Italy subsequently, that we are as yet far from being in a position to attempt a final estimate of Wilson's work and influence. If these few inadequate pages



*In the possession of*

**VIEW OF OXFORD.**

**Richard Wilson**

*Capt R Ford.*



tempt some ardent student to commence the exhaustive, arduous, but invigorating research which the subject demands, the present writer will feel that his purpose has been achieved. The research, though it demands ample leisure and wide travel, will be its own reward, for the more we know about Richard Wilson the more brightly shines the character of the man, and the more original and epoch-making does his work appear.

## APPENDIX I.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY.

- Some Account of the Life of Richard Wilson, Esq , R.A.* By T. Wright. 1824.
- Studies and Designs by Richard Wilson done at Rome in the Year 1752.* Published and with a Preface by Robert Archer. 1811.
- Etchings from the Works of Richard Wilson, with Some Memours of his Life.* By Thomas Hastings, Collector of H.M. Customs. 1825
- Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters.* By Allan Cunningham. 1829-33.
- On the Paintings and Merits of Richard Wilson, and particularly on a Full-length Portrait of J H. Mortimer, A R A.* By John Britton, F S.A.
- The Royal Academy of Arts, from its Foundation in 1769 to 1904.* By Algernon Graves. 1905-6.
- Anecdotes of Painters who have Resided or been Born in England.* By Edward Edwards. 1808.
- A Century of Painters of the English School.* By Samuel Redgrave. 1866.
- Dictionary of Artists of the English School.* By Samuel Redgrave. 1874
- Essays on Art by John Hoppner, R.A.* Edited and with an Introduction by Frank Rutter. 1908
- Richard Wilson, R A.* By Beaumont Fletcher. 1908.
- Catalogue of a Collection of Oil Paintings and Sketches by Richard Wilson, R.A., Lent by Capt. Richard Ford.* With an Introduction by Henry D. Roberts. Brighton Fine Art Galleries. 1920.
- Catalogue of Drawings by British Artists preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum.* By Laurence Binyon. 1907.

## APPENDIX II.

LIST OF PICTURES BY RICHARD WILSON IN  
BRITISH GALLERIES OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

\*\*\* *In all measurements height precedes width*

## ROYAL ACADEMY, DIPLOMA GALLERY.

68. Portrait of the Painter (c. 1768).  
200. Portrait of John Hamilton Mortimer,  
A.R.A. (c. 1761).

## NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY.

1165. Prince George Frederick of Wales (George  
III.) and his brother, Prince Edward  
Augustus, Duke of York (1749).  
1165A. Portrait of Dr. Francis Ayscough, D.D.,  
Dean of Bristol (1749).  
1327. Portrait of the Painter.

## NATIONAL GALLERY.

108. Ruins of the Villa of Mæcnas, Tivoli  
(46in. by 66in.).  
302. View in Italy, with an Arched Ruin (14in.  
by 10in.).  
303. Hadrian's Villa (?) (14in. by 10in.).  
304. Lake Avernus (18½in. by 28½in.).  
1064. On the Wye (10in. by 12in.).  
1290. Landscape with Bathers (23in. by 29½in.).  
2646. Italian Coast Scene (17¾in. by 21½in.).  
3727. Portrait of a Venetian Gentleman (1751).

## TATE GALLERY (NATIONAL GALLERY : BRITISH ART).

110. Destruction of Niobe's Children (46in. by  
66in.).  
267. River Scene (9in. by 11½in.).  
301. View in Italy (22½in. by 30in.).  
1071. Rocky River Scene (6in. by 8½in.).  
2438. The Castle of S. Angelo, Rome (9½in. by  
15½in.).  
2646. Italian Coast Scene (17¾in. by 21½in.).  
2647. Lake Scene (16¾in. by 20¾in.).  
2716. Castle by a Lake (7in. by 9in.).  
2989. Landscape with Quarry (16½in. by 20½in.).

## VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, SOUTH KENSINGTON.

- 15. River Scene (Dyce Collection).
- 42. Landscape Composition: near Naples, with Vesuvius in the Distance.
- 105. Italian Landscape with Group of Venus, Adonis, and Cupids (figures attributed to Cipriani). From the Novar Collection.
- 246. Evening Landscape.
- 263. Landscape.
- 527. Landscape with River and Ruins (Jones Collection).
- 501. Italian River Scene with Figures.

Also a number of drawings and crayon sketches. The following are among the more important:

P. 1519-15. Study for the *Destruction of Niobe's Children*.

- 165. Landscape, with a Ruined Temple (Dyce Bequest).
- 166. Portrait of a Man.
- 167. The Tarpeian Rock, Rome (Dyce Bequest).
- 168. A Stormy Landscape (Dyce Bequest).
- D. 1916-89. Bridge near Dolgelly.
- 169. Landscape, near Ancona (Dyce Bequest).
- 170. Monte Giove and the Campagna (Dyce Bequest).
- 171. Castel Gandolfo, from the distance (Dyce Bequest).

E. 3586-1922. Sketch Book of Studies and Designs in Rome, 1752 (the originals of the Pencil Drawings reproduced in 1811 by Robert Archer).

## PRINT ROOM, BRITISH MUSEUM.

Sixty-one drawings and sketches, of which 59 are included in Mr. Laurence Binyon's Catalogue. The following are among the more important:

- Study for Portrait of Admiral Smith (B. 1).
- On the Tiber (B. 2).

- Nemi (B. 4).  
 Crater of Vesuvius (B. 6).  
 Baths of Diocletian (B. 7).  
 Stream and Willows (B. 9). English Landscape.  
 Temple of Peace, Rome (B. 11). Black and  
 white chalk on grey paper.  
 Children of Niobe (B. 13).  
 Falls of Tivoli (B. 15). Sepia over pencil on  
 brownish paper, heightened with white.  
 Trees at a Villa (B. 19).  
 Villa of Mæcnas at Tivoli (B. 24).  
 View in the Campagna (B. 29).  
 Coast Scene : near Barmouth (B. 33).  
 Sunrise (B. 37). Sketch in coloured chalks.  
 Figures in a Landscape (B. 51). Sanguine  
 Still-life Study (B. 57).  
 \*Rome : from Ponte Mola. Uncatalogued by  
 Binyon (1910-10-13-17).  
 \*St Stephano Rotundo and the Claudia Aque-  
 duct, with St. John Lateran. Uncatalogued  
 by Binyon (1910-10-13-18).

DULWICH GALLERY.

171. Tivoli, Cascatelle.  
 561. Portrait of Lord Egremont.

FOUNDLING HOSPITAL.

- St. George's Hospital (1746).  
 Foundling Hospital (1746).

PAINTED HALL, GREENWICH HOSPITAL.

60. Admiral Thomas Smith (c. 1747?).

BIRMINGHAM, CITY ART GALLERY.

- The Lake of Nemi (oil).  
 864. The Lake of Nemi (pencil, pen, and wash  
 study).

CAMBRIDGE, FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM.

658. Portrait of the Artist.

## CARDIFF, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF WALES.

## (1) Oil Paintings :

- Italian Scene, The White Monk.
- Carnarvon Castle.
- Dinas Bran Castle.
- Cilgerran Castle.
- Study for a Landscape, with River and Castle.
- Neapolitan Coast Scene.
- Landscape, with Figures.
- Manorbier Castle (pre-Italian period).
- Lake Scene, with Buildings.

## (2) Drawings :

- Crayon—Figures and Architectural Background.
- Red Chalk—Heath Scene near London.
- Pen—Italian Study, Ruins and Figures.
- Chalk—Classical Study.
- (And a number of studies in pencil and chalk.)

## DUBLIN, NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND.

## (1) Oil Paintings :

- 157. View near Rome (38½ in. by 26 in.).
- 528. Solitude. (See Appendix III.)

## Milltown Collection :

- 46. View from Tivoli over the Roman Campagna (26 in. by 20 in.).
- 47. Tivoli (26 in. by 20 in.).

## (2) Drawings :

- 2316. Chalk—Study for a Landscape Composition.

## EDINBURGH, NATIONAL GALLERY OF SCOTLAND.

## (1) Oil Paintings :

- 331. Italian Landscape.
- 620. River Scene, with Figures.

## (2) Drawings :

- R.N. 1356. Chalk—Landscape.

## GLASGOW ART GALLERY.

- 1093. Landscape, View near Tivoli (13½ in. by 17 in.).
- 1094. Lake of Como (8½ in. by 9½ in.).

- 1095. Landscape, with River Scene (14in. by 18½in.).
- 1096. The Convent—Twilight (24in. by 37in.).
- 1097. Landscape, with Figures (21in. by 19in.).
- 1098. Landscape, with Figures—a Sketch (5½in. by 9½in.).

LEEDS, CITY ART GALLERY.

Landscape with Bathers (larger and possibly original version of N.G. No. 1290).

View of Coast near Naples (formerly in Sanders Collection. Almost certainly a portion of a larger picture).

MANCHESTER, CITY ART GALLERY.

- 425. Cicero's Villa (40in. by 54in.).
  - 426. A Welsh Valley (35½in. by 41½in.).
  - 427. Landscape with Ruins (66in. by 64in.).
  - 428. Pembroke Castle (23in. by 34in.).
  - 429. Italian Landscape (circular, 26in. diam.)
- Landscape with Figures (17in. by 21½in.).

MANCHESTER, WHITWORTH INSTITUTE.

Landscape Drawing.

NOTTINGHAM, CITY ART GALLERY.

- 225. Snowdon.
- 226. Ruins of a Villa near Rome.

OXFORD, ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM.

Lago di Agnano, Bay of Naples and Vesuvius in the Distance.

Weirs on the River Po near Ferrara.

A Bay of the Sea Coast.

LADY LEVER ART GALLERY, PORT SUNLIGHT.

View of Tivoli, with figures of two women at a stream (48in. by 36in.).

A rocky waterfall, with bandits and other figures in foreground, a bridge in the distance on right—storm and lightning effect (39in. by 50in.).

Italian River Scene: trees and figures in foreground; view of town above in distance (31in. by 38in.).

- Landscape, mountains and castle in distance. Rocks with 'look out' and figures on left; large tree on right, and rocks and figures of lovers under sunshade in foreground (32in. by 25in.).
- A River Scene, with anglers and a mother and babe in foreground, a castle on a height, and figures in a boat, a winding stream and hills in the distance (24in. by 29in.).
- The Bridge at Rimini (19in. by 24in.).
- Landscape, with castle on hill in distance, tree on left, and women bathing in foreground (25in. by 30in.).
- Italian Lake Scene (from Orrock Coll.) (25in. by 19in.).
- Italian River Scene, classical ruins on left, trees in centre and right middle distance, castle, figures, and fallen masonry in foreground (29in. by 25in.).
- Landscape with ruins, castle, and figures in foreground (28in. by 48in.).
- A Classical Lake Scene, with Diana and bathing nymphs in the foreground, a castle on the hill-side beyond; signed with monogram. From the Earl of Northwick's collection (39in. by 53in.).

## APPENDIX III.

## ENGRAVINGS AFTER WILSON.

The following list of the principal engravings from paintings by Wilson, together with the names of the engravers, is taken in its entirety from T. Wright's *Life of Richard Wilson* (1824).

| <i>Subject.</i>        | <i>Engravers.</i> |
|------------------------|-------------------|
| Phaeton.               | Woollet.          |
| Niobe { The figures by | William Sharpe.   |
| { The landscape by     | Samuel Smith.     |
| Niobe.                 | Woollet.          |
| Celadon and Amelia.    | Do.               |
| Ceyx and Alcyone.      | Do.               |
| Cicero at his Villa.   | Do.               |

| <i>Subject.</i>                       | <i>Engravers.</i>    |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Snowdon Hill.                         | Woollet.             |
| Meleager and Atalanta                 | Woollet and Pouncey. |
| Apollo and the Seasons.               | Do.                  |
| Solitude                              | Wollett and Ellis.   |
| Carnarvon Castle.                     | W. Byrne.            |
| Kilgarron Castle.                     | W. Elliott.          |
| Pembroke Town and Castle.             | James Mason.         |
| The great bridge over the Taffe.      | P. C. Canot.         |
| The summit of Cador Idris.            | E. and M. Rooker.    |
| The Lake of Nemi, or Speculum Dianae. | J Wood.              |
| Villa Madama, near Rome, Il Teatro.   | W. Byrne.            |
| A View in Italy                       | James Roberts.       |
| A Landscape.                          | Do.                  |
| Do                                    | Do.                  |
| Villa of Mæcenas, at Tivoli           | M. Rooker.           |
| In the Villa Adriana.                 | Do.                  |
| Circus of Caracalla                   | Do.                  |
| Pompey's Bridge, at Terni.            | James Gandon.        |
| Baths of Diocletian.                  | Do.                  |
| Bridge of Augustus, at Rimini.        | J. Farington.        |
| In the Strada Nomentana.              | Do.                  |
| Banks of the Tiber.                   | J. Gandon.           |
| Temple of Romulus and Remus           | Do.                  |
| Castle of Ischia.                     | Do.                  |
| Temple of Peace.                      | M. Rooker.           |
| Terre del Grotte, near Naples.        | W. Hodges.           |
| A View of Rome.                       | Middiman.            |
| Meleager and Atalanta, mezzotint.     | Earlom.              |
| Tivoli, Dulwich College               | Cockburn.            |
| Do. do. on steel.                     | Charles Turner.      |
| View on the River Dee.                | T. Morris.           |
| Evening.                              | Reynolds.            |



JOSEPH FARINGTON.



## CHAPTER I.

### BIOGRAPHICAL AND PERSONAL.

IF in attempting to reconstruct the life of Richard Wilson, the biographer is disconcerted by the paucity of authentic records available, when it comes to telling the life of his pupil, Joseph Farington, he is embarrassed by the formidable volume of the material at his disposal. Not only can the later life of Farington be followed in detail in the pages of the now famous *Diary*, but, even apart from this monumental work, we possess unrivalled sources of information about his earlier life in the unique collection of his sketch-books and note-books at the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington. The scope of this essay forbids an exhaustive narrative, but with the help of the records already mentioned, and of numerous other published volumes, the assiduous student can trace the career of Farington step by step, from the day he

became Wilson's pupil to the day of his death.

Like his master, he was the son of a clergyman. Joseph Farington was born at Leigh, Lancashire, on 21st November, 1747, his father being the Rev. William Farington, B.D., Vicar of Leigh, and subsequently Rector of Warrington. His grandfather was William Farington of Shawe Hall, a cadet of the ancient Farington family of Lancashire, one of whom, the High Sheriff William Farington of Worden, assisted the Countess of Derby in her celebrated defence of Lathom House during the Civil War.

Thus from birth Joseph Farington had the advantage of belonging to the landed gentry class, and at no time does he appear to have been in pecuniary difficulties. He was the second of seven sons, of whom the eldest, William, married an heiress and the youngest, Robert, became Rector of St. George's-in-the-East. Another brother, George, the next to Joseph, also became an artist, studied historical painting under Benjamin West, and in 1782 went to India, where he died some years later.

When he was sixteen years old Joseph Farington came to London, and at once entered the studio of Richard Wilson. Writing in 1820 to his friend Sir Thomas Lawrence, Farington states :

I came to the Metropolis in 1763, and the Incorporated Society of Artists was founded in 1765.\*

This date not only agrees with the accounts given by Redgrave and other authorities, but is definitely confirmed by one of Farington's sketch-books in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which is dated December, 1763, and gives his address as 'At Mr. R. Wilson's, in the Great Piazza, Covent Garden.'†

That Joseph Farington was not exactly a novice when he came to Wilson is a natural inference to draw from the fact that in 1764 he was awarded a premium by the Society of Arts for landscape drawing.

---

\* *Sir Thomas Lawrence's Letter-Bag*. Edited by G. S. Layard, 1906, p. 161.

† This sketch-book (p. 72-1921) is not numbered, and precedes 'Sketch-book No. 1' (p. 73-1921) which is dated 'Finished 24th June, 1764,' but thereafter for some years Farington methodically numbered his sketch-books in chronological order

This, we may imagine, was an encouragement for promise rather than a recognition of achievement, and a fair idea of his progress at this stage may be derived from his accomplished, if tentative, pencil drawing of *Hampstead Heath* in the 1764 'Sketch-book No. 1.'

The Society of Arts, which had been founded in 1760, was incorporated in 1765, and in that year Joseph Farington was elected a member in addition to receiving another premium. In 1766 his *Drawing in Black Chalk* gained him a further premium.

Though still continuing to take lessons from Wilson, Farington, even in these early years, seems to have led quite an independent life. In 1767, when he was lodging 'At Rev. Mr. Jacob's, Long Acre,' we learn from his Sketch-book No. 5 that he made a short visit to France. Under date 1st August for this year we find the entry: 'Sailed from Dover for Calais at 9.20,' and this sketch-book also contains his permit to embark for England, dated 26th August.

The following year (1768) was a momentous one for the arts in England. The Society of Artists, which from its inception had been

racked by internal dissensions, received its death-blow in 1768, when the majority of its leading members resigned in a body and with the approval of King George III. founded the Royal Academy of Arts.

Richard Wilson, as we know, resigned from the Society, and became one of the foundation members of the Royal Academy. Farington was not old enough or important enough to follow his master's example, but with that diplomatic astuteness and business instinct which marked all his later career, on this occasion he showed his precocious ability to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. He remained a member of the Society of Artists, strengthening his position there by his loyalty, and in 1769, being then only twenty-two years of age, he became one of the first students in the Royal Academy Schools.

None of these events, however, interfered with the close association of Wilson and Farington as master and pupil. This is sufficiently proved by the sketch-books, and one dated 1768 contains a pencil drawing by Farington so remarkably like Richard Wilson's *Landscape with View of Oxford* in

the Ford Collection that it seems not unlikely that in this year the two artists made a sketching tour together in Oxfordshire.

Meanwhile Farington, while keeping in with the Academicians, developed into one of the most important members of the moribund Society of Artists, and about 1772 he was elected one of its directors, an experience which no doubt was useful to him in later life, when he captured the direction of the Royal Academy. About this time Joseph, together with his younger brother George, was employed by Alderman Boydell to make drawings (for the purpose of engraving) from pictures in the Houghton Collection. 'On the completion of this work he returned to his own country,' says Redgrave, 'and studied the landscape scenery of the lake districts of Cumberland and Westmorland.' Redgrave's statement is corroborated by the picture *A Waterfall*, sent in from Keswick, which was Farington's first picture to be accepted by the Royal Academy, where it was exhibited in 1778. Since 1773 Farington had ceased to exhibit at the Society of Artists, but he exhibited at the Academy again in 1780, and from the following year, when he

returned to London, he was a constant Academy exhibitor.

While Joseph Farington was in the north of England, poor Richard Wilson fell upon evil days. It is perhaps not altogether an idle fancy to imagine that had Farington been in London during these years his loyal admiration and business ability might have steered Wilson through his difficulties, and mitigated the tragedy of his later years. In 1781 it was too late to help Wilson effectually. While his ex-pupil was able to establish himself decently at No. 35 Upper Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square, the master had been living miserably 'at a mean house in Tottenham Street,' dependent for his food on his scanty remuneration as Librarian of the Royal Academy.

It is by no means certain that Farington saw Wilson when he returned to London. At the most, only a month or two could have intervened between Farington's arrival in London and Wilson's departure for Wales, and, in default of any evidence to the contrary, we may surmise that Wilson had already left London before Farington returned.

The younger artist was well able to look after himself. The year after his return he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy and two years later, in 1785, he was made an Academician. That he had a reputation as connoisseur as well as artist we know from his being called upon as an expert in 1787 to give evidence in a lawsuit over a disputed Poussin.

Here it may be observed that, while he painted and exhibited landscapes in oils, these were not really the source of Farington's income and reputation. He was esteemed chiefly as a topographical draughtsman, and his drawings brought him fame and fortune. The fruit of his years in the north was a folio published in 1789, *Views of the Lakes, etc., in Cumberland and Westmorland*, containing twenty plates engraved in colour after Farington's tinted drawings. This proved so popular that a new edition, with forty-three plates, was issued in 1813. In 1790 W. Byrne published another collection of Farington's sketches, *Views of Cities and Towns in England and Wales*, and four years later appeared the most important of all his books, the two folio volumes of Boydell's *History of*



*Victoria and Albert Museum.*

## LANCASTER FROM THE NORTH-EAST

Joseph Farlington



*the River Thames*, with seventy-six colour plates engraved in aquatint by J. C. Stadler after Farington.

During these years Farington had married, and, from every point of view, he had married wisely and well. His wife was a daughter of the Rev. Dr. Hammond, Prebendary of Norwich, and, what was still more helpful to her husband, she was a cousin of Horace Walpole, Earl of Orford. Thus Farington, who from his birth had had the entry into county society, came into close connection with the most prominent *arbiter elegantiarum* of his day.

It was after a visit to this cousin-by-marriage at Strawberry Hill on 13th July, 1793, that Farington, so far as we know, began his great *Diary*, which thus opens well with the thrilling experience of his visit to Walpole and gossip about Boswell, Gibbon, and other major celebrities. Whether Farington ever diarised before this has not so far been established, but, having formed the habit in July, 1793, he kept it up to the day of his death, nearly thirty years later.

Sir Joshua Reynolds had been dead just over a year when Farington began to take

notes, and his successor in the presidency of the Academy, Benjamin West, is the central figure throughout the earliest portion of the *Diary*. Farington's attitude towards West, which will occupy our attention later on, was curiously cynical and characteristic. He kept in with him for his own purposes, he undoubtedly used him, but all the time he seems to despise him, and rarely misses an opportunity of telling a story calculated to demonstrate West's lack of intelligence and want of education.

To the student of British painting, however, the most interesting of the comparatively early entries are the following :

Constable called and brot. his sketches of landscapes in neighbourhood of Dedham. Father a merct, who has now consented that C—— shall devote his time to the study of art.—Wishes to be in Academy I told him He must prepare a figure.

Constable called, and brought a small landscape of his painting I recommended to him to unite firmness with freedom, and avoid flimsiness.

Constable called and I talked to him about his proceeding in art and recommended him to study nature and *particular* art less.

In 1795, when Constable first came to London, Joseph Farington was a prominent man-about-town and an Academician with

considerable influence. Though always prejudiced against Turner, Farington took a liking to the 'natural painter' from the first. He 'predicted Constable's future excellence; and said, at an early period of their acquaintance, that his style of landscape would one day "form a distinct feature in the art." ' \*

The common description of Farington as 'Wilson's pupil and Constable's master' is, as regards the latter half of the statement, inaccurate. C. R. Leslie emphatically denies that Constable was ever actually Farington's pupil,

though he, no doubt, received many valuable hints from a painter who, though not a man of genius, possessed a great deal of common-sense, and could tell him much of the practice of Wilson.†

That Farington's position rested little on his paintings is borne out by the curious fact that as his influence grew greater at the Royal Academy, so his own contributions to its exhibitions grew less frequent. He sent one work only to the exhibition of 1801; in 1802 and 1803 he exhibited nothing; in 1804 he showed three paintings, and then sent

---

\* C. R. Leslie, R.A., *Memoirs of John Constable*.

† *Ibid.*

nothing for the next six years. Yet all this time he was the real power behind the throne of Mr. Benjamin West, P.R.A.

How remarkably soon Joseph Farington became a person of consequence at the Academy is shown as early as 1790, when he was one of the deputation who waited on Sir Joshua Reynolds and begged him to withdraw his resignation, brought about by the Bonomi affair.

Writing in May, 1791, to his friend and patron, John Leigh Philips, the painter Joseph Wright of Derby complains of the manner in which his own and his pupil Tate's pictures are hung in the Academy :

'Tis their duty to form the best exhibition in their power by giving every picture the place its merit claims, but partiality pervades the whole, and I have frequently seen pictures unworthy of public exhibition possessing the most advantageous places.

Who it is that misconducts this matter I know not, but I have heard Farington has much sway in the Academy.\*

In the spring of 1799 Farington again came to the front as one of the principal witnesses

---

\* *Life of Joseph Wright, A.R.A.*, by William Bemrose, 1885, p. 66.

against James Barry, R.A., when that unhappy genius was summoned to appear before a Committee of the Academy for unbecoming conduct. Barry had been Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy since 1782, and had greatly irritated his contemporaries by alluding contemptuously in his lectures to works by fellow Academicians. His quarrelsome temper and his avowed republicanism made him exceedingly uncongenial to the majority of his brother artists, but though there was reason in removing him from the professorship—to which he should never have been appointed—his expulsion from the Royal Academy was a discreditable act of bigotry. Farington, who took a leading part in demanding Barry's expulsion, succeeded in his object, for, as usual, he was on the side of the big battalions, and though his action appears ungenerous to us, in his own eyes he was doubtless an upholder of the dignity of his profession and a champion of that respectability which we always associate with academic mediocrity.

Respectability—so often preferred to kindness or generosity—was particularly esteemed at the end of the eighteenth century, and

Farington, in his *Diary*, records the satisfaction of Mrs. Richard Cosway (wife of the miniaturist) in feeling that 'Art and artists are on a more respectable footing in England than in any other country.' In passing we may note that this eccentric lady made a loud protest in 1797 against Farington's influence, and the diarist placidly notes down her grievance, without adding any comment. All the same, it may be doubted whether the modern painter would find much cause for satisfaction in the 'footing' on which artists were admitted to eighteenth century society. Farington's *Diary* makes it clear that they were tolerated, not 'lionised,' and put on the level of the country doctor and family solicitor. Highly illuminating is his story of the miniaturist, Ozias Humphrey (1742-1810), at Knowle—choosing a bedroom for himself, turned out by his host the Duke of Dorset, reinstated by the Duchess, quarrelling with Hoppner for precedence, outraged by being told that he was 'a man of no family,' yet pocketing every affront and staying on long after his welcome was over.

It may be assumed that Joseph Farington, owing to his family connections, was on

rather a better footing in most of these great houses than the majority of his brother artists, but unfortunately the *Diary*, so clear and profuse in other respects, gives us little or no information on the important point how far Farington's country visits were social, and how far professional.

Dr. Edmund Gosse, in a review of *The Farington Diary*, calls attention to the frequency with which the diarist is the companion of George or Nathaniel Dance on these visits, and suggests that the real explanation of Farington's presence on these occasions is 'that he might paint in a landscape background behind the portrait groups.'\* Apart from the paintings themselves, I know of no evidence to support Dr. Gosse's hypothesis, which is nevertheless quite credible and worthy of careful investigation.

It has been said that *The Farington Diary* is 'not the revelation of an ingenious and fascinating personality,' but owes its value to its fullness as an historical record. This may be a just verdict, yet when we take Farington's domination of the Academy in conjunction with the admitted fact that his

---

\**Sunday Times*, 31st December, 1922.

position was in no wise due to any uncommon power or perfection in his painting, we feel that the man himself must have had some personal magnetism for those with whom he came in contact.

From the wealth of testimony to Farington's power in the academic debates and councils, let it suffice to quote the words of his fellow Academician, James Northcote :

How Farington used to rule the Academy ! He was the great man, to be looked up to on all occasions ; all applicants must gain their point through him.\*

How did Farington acquire this commanding position ? After making all due allowance for the fact that he belonged to a higher social class than that from which the majority of his fellow artists sprang, counting his connection with Horace Walpole and all his other aids to eminence, his dictatorship is none the less inexplicable unless we credit the man with a strong personality. We get a broad hint as to how Farington's influence was acquired from William Sandby, the historian of the Royal Academy :

---

\* *Conversations of James Northcote with James Ward.*

From his unceasing attention to the interests of the institution, combined with great diplomatic tact, and many other effective elements of social popularity, he possessed a degree of weight in the counsels of the Academy far beyond any other member—so much so that with some he bore the appellation of ‘Dictator of the Royal Academy.’\*

Farington never boasts in his *Diary*, yet incidents continually crop up to show how keenly his favour was solicited. In 1796 the King’s architect and first treasurer of the Royal Academy, Sir William Chambers, R.A., died. On the following day (9th March) Sir John Soane waited upon Farington and asked his support in his candidature for the vacancy. Farington told him he ‘stood a good chance,’ and at the next election Soane was chosen as an Associate. If Farington supported his election, as seems probable, it shows that what we may describe as Farington’s ‘political’ favours were not dependent on, or biased by, his æsthetic views; for the diarist had a poor opinion of Soane’s architecture, and as far back as 1793 had expressed his opinion that Soane’s designs for the Bank of England were ‘affected and contemptible.’

---

\* *History of the Royal Academy of Arts from its Foundation in 1768 to the Present Time*, by William Sandby, 1862.

In the eighteenth century, as in later days, social position weighed heavily in Academy elections, and Farington probably held that, even if Soane was a poor sort of architect *as an artist*, he was a man of good professional standing, who had amassed considerable wealth and attained a good social position, and as such he was the sort of man the Royal Academy wanted far more than an ill-tempered genius like Barry. In Academy elections we may be sure that Farington took a commonsense, and possibly a worldly rather than an artistic view, but it would be a mistake to imagine that he had no strong feelings about art. His appreciations were limited, and, like every other artist who ever lived, he overestimated some of his contemporaries and grossly underestimated others; but Northcote goes too far when he says that Farington

cared nothing at all about pictures; his great passion was the love of power—he loved to rule. He did it, of course, with considerable dignity, but he had an untamable spirit which, I suppose, was due to the fact that he had lost the game as a painter, and that it was too late to mend the matter.\*

---

\* *Op. cit.*

Northcote's conclusion is merely spiteful. A man cannot lose a game he has never begun to play, and it may seriously be questioned whether Farington ever set himself up to be more than one of the topographical draughtsmen of his time, among whom he was one of the most eminent and most successful. That he loved to rule, however, cannot be disputed, and on one occasion—and on one only, so far as the records go—his high-handed methods, though temporarily successful, were eventually defeated.

In 1804, according to Redgrave, Farington was 'the avowed and active member of the confederacy' which led to the suspension of John Singleton Copley, R.A., and four other members of the Royal Academy. In that year the internal affairs of the Academy reached a crisis, the real point in dispute being whether the Academy should be ruled by the Council or the General Assembly. Farington made himself the Cromwell of the Assembly, and, when the Council loftily denied its responsibility to the general body of members, he induced the General Assembly to retaliate by suspending five prominent members of the Council from their offices.

For the moment Farington appeared to have won, and though George III. eventually ordered the reinstatement of the five suspended members, the power of the Council had been checked, and it was no longer in a position to act autocratically.

Later in the same year there was another storm in the Academy teacup over Benjamin West's outspoken admiration of Napoleon Bonaparte, and the Academicians, who had a hundred opinions on artistic matters, were roused to a fury of unanimity on this political subject. West found himself utterly unsupported at the annual election, and was practically compelled to resign. Even the *Diary* does not reveal the whole secret thought of Farington on this controversy, but he appears to have again displayed his genius for diplomatic intrigue. A letter from Sir Thomas Lawrence \* to Farington leaves no doubt that the latter not only voted against West, but persuaded his friend Lawrence to do the same; yet on the surface Farington still remained on friendly and

---

\* Cf *Sir Thomas Lawrence's Letter-Bag*, by G. S. Layard, p. 32.

cordial terms with the resigned President. For a year the Academy was virtually without a president, but if Farington had genuinely desired the humiliation of West in 1804, he soon came to see that it would be expedient to re-elect him, and other letters written by Lawrence go to show that Farington was among those who worked for West's reinstatement, and even after West's re-election as President in 1805 Farington was concerned to see him securely seated in the chair.

Farington probably reached the zenith of his power within the Academy during 1804-5, and thereafter, though long remaining an influential person, his 'dictatorship' waned. But his influence was not ephemeral; he left his mark on the institution, and the visitor to the spring exhibition ought to know that it is owing to Farington that he has to pay one shilling, instead of sixpence, for a catalogue. Farington raised the price in 1809, and it has never been lowered since. In the same year, when he and George Dance were auditors of the Academy accounts, Farington presented a scheme, enthusiastically adopted, whereby certain economies

and certain shrewd investments resulted in a considerable increase of the Academy's permanent income.\* In fact, Joseph Farington, R.A., was the first of a long line of acute business men who have made the Royal Academy the best paying—and possibly the *only* paying—art society in the United Kingdom.

When the promised further volumes of *The Farington Diary* are published we shall know still more details of the artist's later years. It must be remembered that although the volume already issued contains close on 300,000 words, it is only a first instalment, covering the years from 1793 to 1802, and, even so, the printed book—which omits certain Rabelaisian after-dinner stories—does not reproduce the full copiousness of the original manuscript.

Meanwhile we know, from one of the most delightfully filled sketch-books in the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, that in 1810 Farington made a prolonged tour through Devon and Cornwall. From a letter

---

\* Cf. *History of the Royal Academy*, by Wm. Sandby, pp. 275-276.

written to him by Sir Thomas Lawrence in the October of the same year we also gather that after this tour Farington had a serious illness, which must have interrupted, but evidently did not break, his professional practice. He continued working for the engravers, and in 1811, after a lapse of six years, he recommenced sending to the Royal Academy. Among his three exhibits of 1812 were two souvenirs of his tour in the West of England, *Torquay* and *Polperro*. These are the pictures which Constable, in a letter to his sweetheart, Maria Bicknell, dated 6th May, 1812, pronounced to be 'beautiful landscapes, but they are heavy and crude.' A strange assemblage of adjectives !

In the following year (1813) Farington exhibited at the Royal Academy for the last time. His remaining years were spent partly in making occasional drawings of views for engravings, partly in living the life of a country gentleman, and partly, we may now guess, in literary work. In the light of the *Diary Farington's Memoirs of the Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, published in 1819, assumes a fresh significance, and it may be observed that his maiden literary effort was

an immediate success, a second edition being called for in the following year.

Farington was now a hale old gentleman of seventy-seven, and, though no longer the 'dictator' of his middle years, he was still an oracle to be consulted on the conduct and organising of art societies. During 1820 he appears to have given Sir Thomas Lawrence much useful advice in connection with the project of establishing a Hibernian Academy, and in the same year he had the happiness of seeing Sir Thomas Lawrence, his life-long friend and almost his disciple, elected President of the Royal Academy. What part the veteran played in this election we may learn from the *Diary*, and possibly it may be regarded as the last triumph of the old king-maker, for almost on the last day of the following year, on the 30th December, 1821, he died as the result of an accident.

Hitherto, according to Redgrave, it has been supposed that Farington died through a fall from his horse, but in a supplement to the *Diary* his daughter tells us that, having attended evening service at the church of Didsbury, and descending from the gallery with his umbrella in one hand and his hat

and his prayer-book in the other, ' his feet equally encumbered with goloshes,' Mr. Farington slipped downstairs with such velocity that, when they picked him up, ' the vital spark was gone.'

## CHAPTER II.

### ASSOCIATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS.

WHEN seeking in the last chapter for an explanation of the remarkable position which Joseph Farington held among the artists of his time, one cause which probably contributed very largely to his influence was deliberately reserved for consideration here. We get a strong hint as to the real hold of Farington over his brother painters in the passage already quoted from Leslie's *Memoirs of Constable*.

C. R. Leslie, it will be remembered, does not hide his poor opinion of Farington as an artist, and scouts the idea that Constable was ever actually his pupil, but he significantly adds that Farington could tell Constable '*much of the practice of Wilson.*'

Notwithstanding Sir Joshua's grudging and ill-considered tribute, there appears to be no doubt whatever that almost immediately after his death Richard Wilson was considered by the best painters, and particularly

by the landscape painters, of the rising generation to be a very great man indeed. Among his contemporaries, Joseph Farington shone with Wilson's reflected glory. Rightly or wrongly, he was regarded as the repository of all Wilson's painting secrets, and ambitious young painters came to him, not because they believed Farington himself to be a great painter, but because they hoped that from him they might glean some useful hints as to the practice of his master.

Probably they were not disappointed. The sketch-books at South Kensington show the thorough tuition the pupil received from the master, and most probably they were treasured up by the owner, not for the sake of his own early efforts, but because of the corrections and practical hints in them by Wilson. Farington all his life had the most tremendous admiration for Richard Wilson: his loyalty to his first master is one of the most lovable traits of his character. The *Diary* is full of his enthusiasm for Wilson's art. He never missed an opportunity to exalt him at the expense of other landscape painters, not even excepting the great Claude Lorraine.

Here, for example, is an extract from the *Diary* for 1806 :

*June 10th.*—Humphry [R A.] called and brought Mr. Wood, teacher of Perspective, with Him, desirous to see the *View of Rome* [by R. Wilson]. On seeing it he burst out, ' It is as simple as possible, and as grand as it can be. It is as if Michael Angelo had taken it up.' Compared with Claude the largeness and dignity of Wilson's mind is most striking.

It is likely, therefore, that Farington derived a good deal of his authority among painters from his long and close association with Richard Wilson. Among the list of Wilson's pupils given by Wright, Farington—if we except the amateur Sir George Beaumont—is easily the best known and most distinguished, though we are told that Wilson himself considered Carr to be his most promising pupil. But Carr died when he was only twenty-one. Another pupil, Plimer, also died young in Italy ; Huddersfield—like Peters\*—became a clergyman ; Boulton

---

\* The Rev. Matthew William Peters, R.A., is said to have been so affected by the spectacle of the penury of a genius like Richard Wilson that he decided to take holy orders rather than depend on art alone for his livelihood. An Academician since 1777, he is first described as ' The Reverend ' in 1783, *the year after Wilson's death*.

earned a local reputation as a horse painter in Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire ; and William Hodges, R.A. (1744-1797),\* spent so much time abroad that, even had his origin been less obscure, he was unlikely to have much influence in Academy circles.

Beginning life as an errand-boy, Hodges was noticed by Wilson, who took him to be his assistant. He made rapid progress, and, after gaining employment as a scene painter in Derby, he was in 1772 appointed as draughtsman to Captain Cook's second expedition. He was away for three years, and first exhibited at the Academy in 1776, and about 1779-1780 he went to India, where he stayed till 1784. In 1786 he was elected an Associate, and in 1787 was promoted to be R.A., but three years later he started on an extensive Continental tour, penetrating as far as Russia, and on his return exhibited

---

\* Hodges, probably as a result of his travels in the East, pitched many of his paintings in a much higher key of colour than his contemporaries, and in this respect was distinctly in advance of his age. His *View of the Ghauts at Benares* (No. 223), in the Diploma Gallery, is wonderfully modern in its colouring, and the delicate light blues in it anticipate the *peinture grise* of the later nineteenth century.

at the Academy till 1794, when he settled in Dartmouth and attempted to establish a bank. Hodges ruined himself in this effort, and died in poverty at Brixham in 1797.

Another pupil of Wilson, William Marlow (1740-1813), though seven years older than Farington, was hardly in a position to challenge the latter's position as Wilson's foremost disciple. Though a member of the Society of Artists since about 1762, Marlow exhibited at the Academy for the first time in 1788, three years after Farington had been elected an Academician. Some paintings by Marlow in the Foundling Hospital are faint echoes of Wilson's colour, but are weaker in draughtsmanship and design.

Another pupil of Wilson at Rome was Robert Crone, who, though weak in drawing, at his best approached the colour of his master closer than any of Wilson's numerous pupils.

To tell even something of all the artists with whom Farington associated would be to emulate the prolixity of his *Diary*, and the endeavour would probably throw little light on his or their art, because, with very few exceptions, Farington's relations with

other artists were social and not professional. Among his numerous acquaintances, one of his most intimate friends was Thomas Lawrence ; but though he gave him a quantity of good advice on business and directorial matters, nobody could imagine that Farington had any influence on Lawrence's art. This brilliant youth entered the Academy Schools in 1787, and appears to have become friendly at once with the Academician of two years' standing. Sir Walter Armstrong noted that Joseph Farington kept house for Lawrence during the latter's early period, and Mr. F. Gordon Roe, in his excellent monograph, has recalled that a drawing of Farington dated 1790 was included in the Lawrence sale of 1830.

Farington's social relations with Lawrence, Benjamin West, and the rest do not intrigue us nearly so much as his professional relations with the two great landscape painters of the next generation. Farington was the bridge between Richard Wilson and Constable and Turner. In his own drawings and paintings he added nothing to his master's art, but he passed on the torch to others who could kindle it still more brightly. Wilson is so poorly represented as a painter in our national

collections that only those who know the Ford Collection and the drawings in the British Museum can realise the extent to which he paved the way for Constable and Turner. Few people think of Wilson as a 'natural' landscape painter, yet his *Thames at Twickenham* is as surely the forerunner of the Constable landscape as the blaze of the setting sun in his great picture *The Tiber* is the prelude to Turner's sunsets. The germ of both Constable and Turner is contained in Wilson; Farington could very possibly see the Constable in him, but he was not big enough to see the Turner. Was Farington's antipathy to Turner purely artistic or a personal matter? The cordiality existing between him and Constable from their first meeting never seems to have been extended to Turner, even in his youth. Even the formal phrases of the *Diary* convey a suggestion that a call from Constable was a pleasure enjoyed, a call from Turner a duty endured. Compare the passage already quoted with this entry in the *Diary* for 1798, when Turner was twenty-three :

Turner has called. He talked to me about his present situation. He said that by continuing to

reside at his Father's he benefited him and His Mother ; but He thought He might derive advantages from placing himself in a more respectable situation.—He said He had more commissions at present than He could execute and got more money than He expended. The advice I gave him was to continue in his present situation till He had laid aside a few hundred pounds, and He then might with confidence, and without uneasy apprehensions, place himself in a situation more suitable to the rank He bears in the Art.

I afterwards called upon him at his Father's, a Hair Dresser, in Hand Court, Maiden Lane.—The apartments, to be sure, small and ill calculated for a painter.—He showed me two Books filled with studies from nature—several of them tinted on the spot, which He found, He said, were much the most valuable to him. He requested me to fix upon any subject which I preferred in his books and begged to make a drawing or picture of it for me. I told him I had not the least claim to such a present from Him, but on his pressing it I said I would take another opportunity of looking over his books and avail myself of his offer.—Hoppner, He said, had chosen a subject at Durham. Hoppner, He told me, had remarked to him that his pictures tended too much *to the brown*, and that in consequence of that observation He had been attending to nature to enable him to correct it.

Throughout the interview Farington's attitude appears to have been non-committal. Obviously he does not jump at the opportunity of possessing a Turner drawing, but evades its acceptance with his customary grave politeness. He gives nothing but financial advice to Turner, and refuses to be

drawn on the vexed 'brown landscape' question. Turner, one imagines, was endeavouring to sound Farington as to the kind of landscape likely to be most acceptable to the Royal Academy, and it is not a wild conjecture to imagine that some of his very early pictures, *e.g.* *Fishermen at Sea*, of 1796, were deliberately painted something in the style of Farington. Though receiving no warm encouragement from Farington, as Constable did, Turner managed for the time being to avoid his hostility. In the following year (1799) he was elected an Associate, in 1802 he was made Academician, and the next year exhibited his *Calais Pier*. Once Academician, Turner began to let himself go, and then Farington could no longer repress his indignation at Turner's proceedings. The following extract from *The Farington Diary* of 1806 tells its own story :

*June 3rd.*— . . . Turner's I went to and saw His picture of the *Battle of Trafalgar*. It appeared to me to be a very crude, unfinished performance ; the figures miserably bad. His pictures in general invited similar remarks, when the prices he puts upon them are considered, because much more ought to be shown to justify such demands.

Sir George Beaumont and Edridge (A.R.A.) came in at 5 o'clock . . . and neither having

dined they staid and dined with me off cold roast beef and cold Pigeon Pye.

We had a strong conversation on the merits of Wilson as a Landscape Painter and the vicious practice of Turner and His followers was warmly exposed.

Almost one can find it in one's heart to forgive Farington his dispraise of Turner, for he loved Wilson much.

Meanwhile, what of his own practice? What was the quality of Farington's art? As a painter he never rose above the 'school' rank, and at his best his pictures belong to the school of Richard Wilson. Many have been sold as Richard Wilsons, and in all probability many still masquerade under that master's name. Farington is not represented in the National Gallery, nor, apart from the extrinsic interest of his *Diary*, is there any reason why he should be. The only oil painting by him easily accessible to the public of London is his *Coast Scene* (No. 207) in the Diploma Gallery of the Royal Academy. As his Diploma work we may regard this as a standard example of Farington's oil painting in the middle eighties. As in some of Marlow's paintings, there is a hint of Wilson in the blue sky with clouds, but otherwise the

colour is dull. The rocky cliff (to the spectator's right) with the fisherman's hut below, the fishwives helping the men to push out the boats, the baskets in the foreground and the sea in the middle distance, all are painted competently, but without a spark of inspiration. The handling throughout is heavy and dull except in the sky, where a faint trace of Wilson's glow still resides.

There is far more personality and distinction in Farington's drawings. Of these there is a fairly numerous and representative collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, while an exhibition at Mr. Walker's Galleries in New Bond Street in 1921 offered a still wider selection of Farington's drawings for study.

Generally speaking, Farington's drawings fall into one of two classes ; either they are more or less complete studies for pictures in one of the styles of Richard Wilson, or they are purely topographical drawings made for the purpose of engraving. In the charming *Lancaster : N.E. View* at South Kensington, showing in the left-hand corner a tree whose bough stretches out over the river, which curls round to our right, and the long bridge in

the middle distance, beyond which the buildings of the city are dimly visible, Farington gives us a refined and delicate drawing in the Italian or classical style of Wilson. In *The Lady Oak, near Cressage, Shropshire*, dated 1789, we have a still more personal and distinguished drawing, based on Wilson's English or 'natural' style, the style of the *Twickenham* riverscape in the Ford Collection. In this composition the great tree is placed boldly in the centre of the design, and drawn with consummate conscientiousness; but this is not an innovation. The description of Wilson as 'the man who always paints a tree in the corner of his pictures' betrays the speaker to be a man very slightly and imperfectly acquainted with Wilson's paintings. Even while he was in Italy Wilson could base a design on a blow given almost in the exact centre of the canvas by the top of a tree, as in *The Vale of Narni, near Rome*. Credit, nevertheless, must be given to Farington here for following his master, not only in his obvious designs, but in his more subtle pattern-building, and in another drawing, to be mentioned later, Farington adopts a similar form of composition, with

magnificent effect. The *Welsh Landscape*, in the collection of Mr. V. Rienacker, is an agreeable compromise between Wilson's *On the River Wye*, and the requirements of the topographical drawing. *Worcester Cathedral from the South West* (1789), in the Victoria and Albert Museum, like *Kirkstall Abbey* and *Rochester* shown in the Walker's Galleries Exhibition, is purely topographical, cleanly drawn, neatly designed, and effective in its clear and simple lighting. With more majestic subjects Farington is less successful, and his *Edinburgh Castle*, in the exhibition mentioned, was a comparative failure. An attempt at dramatic lighting, the castle, brilliantly illumined, being shown towering above two flanking houses in deep shadow, it defeated its own object, for the castle protrudes from its proper place, disturbs the balance, looks top-heavy, and yet is unsubstantial.

Only three drawings by Farington are as yet in the Print Room of the British Museum. Two of these are purely topographical. *Town Hall at King's Lynn*, dated 1787, is a careful pen and sepia drawing with Indian ink wash, conscientious but exceedingly dull,

and wholly devoid of atmosphere. No living being could breathe in these streets. The large, tinted drawing of Bridgenorth, showing the bridge across the river, with houses beyond and figures in the foreground, is decidedly better, but is still commonplace and topographical. It will never do to compare this with Girtin's *Bridgenorth*, also in the Museum.

But a third drawing by Farington in the British Museum may be compared with anything in its own class. *Landscape with Horseman* shows Farington's art at its highest, and here he rises above topography to the limpid, arresting vision of a master. It shows us 'A horseman, stopping at the top of a slope in a road, on the left bank of which grows an isolated beech tree; beyond are fields and woods, with a house appearing among them.' Thus runs the description in Mr. Laurence Binyon's catalogue. It is executed in pen and sepia with Indian ink wash, and with a few washes of blue in the sky, yet with these restricted means the whole scene is full of colour. Here again a tree almost in the centre forms the focus of the design, and this time there is a wonderful sense of air and

space before and behind it. Masterly throughout in its economy of line, the figures particularly deserve attention. When we look at the horse and its rider, so splendidly and simply drawn, a maximum of expression given with a minimum of means, we feel that Joseph Farington had indeed the right to criticise the figures in the drawings of others.

Stress has been laid on this drawing because, in the writer's opinion, it is the finest work by Farington in any collection easily accessible ; but it can hardly be questioned that, where his drawings are concerned, Farington is not yet adequately represented in our national collections. Whether all the original drawings for his *Views of the Lakes* and *History of the Thames* still exist is uncertain, but many of them, particularly *Nuneham from the Wood* and *Ewen Mill*, deserve a place in a national collection.

To assess the whole achievement of Joseph Farington is perhaps outside the scope of an art-critic, for, though now and again one of his drawings may rouse us to a pitch of excitement and enthusiasm, the whole of his pictorial work can hardly be said to loom so largely in British art as his habit of ' taking



*British Museum*

LANDSCAPE WITH HORSEMAN

Joseph Farington



notes ' seems likely to do among British diaries. *The Farington Diary*, Dr. Gosse has said, ' excels in the revival of the movement of social life in the sphere to which the diarist belonged, that is to say, in the more or less official and always professional activities of art-production and of art-patronage.' \*

And the last word as to Farington's quality as an artist may also be safely left to the same learned and impartial pen :

The broad and noble manner of Wilson it was the ambition of Joseph Farington to reproduce, but he did not carry out his aim with more than moderate success. He became what was called ' a topographical draughtsman,' and he was one of those meritorious artists who, towards the close of the eighteenth century, faithfully and elegantly noted with a reed-pen the newly discovered beauties of our English lakes and rivers.†

---

\* *Sunday Times*, 31st December, 1922.

† *Idem*.

## APPENDIX I.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY.

*The Farington Diary.* Edited by James Greig. 1922. (Also serial publication of same in *The Morning Post*, 1922-1923).

*Walker's Quarterly*, No. 5. October, 1921. 'Dictator of the Royal Academy: An Account of Joseph Farington, R.A.' By F. Gordon Roe.

*Sir Thomas Lawrence's Letter-Bag.* Edited by George Somes Layard. 1906.

*Conversations of James Northcote with James Ward, R.A., on Art and Artists.* Edited by Ernest Fletcher. 1901.

(See also Works in WILSON BIBLIOGRAPHY.)

## APPENDIX II.

### LIST OF WORKS BY JOSEPH FARINGTON IN BRITISH GALLERIES OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

#### ROYAL ACADEMY, DIPLOMA GALLERY.

207. A Coast Scene. Oil painting (c. 1785).

#### BRITISH MUSEUM PRINT ROOM.

Town Hall at King's Lynn. Sepia drawing (1787).  
Landscape, with Horseman. Pen drawing slightly tinted (? 1790).

At Bridgenorth. Water-colour.

## VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM.

A number of sketch-books, ranging in date from 1763 to 1810, also drawings and water-colours, of which the following are among the most important :

Near Hastings (1785). Large tinted drawing.

Worcester Cathedral (1789) Pencil and wash drawing (9½in. by 13½in.)

Lancaster, N.E. View (9in. by 15½in.).

The Lady Oak, near Cressage, Shropshire (1789) (17in. by 17½in.).

An Old Manor House (9½in. by 16½in.).

## BIRMINGHAM, CITY ART GALLERY

429. View of the Bridge and part of the Village of Rydal, water-colour (15in. by 22in.).

## EDINBURGH, NATIONAL GALLERY OF SCOTLAND.

R.N. 2277. The Archway, water-colour (4½in. by 6in.).

## MANCHESTER, WHITWORTH INSTITUTE.

Stirling Castle, water-colour and oil, with pen and wash (10½in. by 16½in.).

Carlisle, pen and wash (12½in. by 18½in.).

Linlithgow, pencil and water-colour (10in. by 19in.).











